

**Joint inspection of services to protect children and young
people in the West Lothian Council area**

7 October 2010

The inspection of services to protect children¹ in the West Lothian Council area was carried out in June 2010. We looked at the services provided by health, the police, the council and the Children's Reporter. We also looked at the services provided by voluntary and independent organisations. Our report describes how good they are at protecting children and keeping them safe. To find this out we read a sample of children's files which were held by these services. We talked to a number of children and their parents and carers to listen to their views about the services they had received. We also spoke to staff in these services who worked with children, parents and carers and to senior managers who were responsible for these staff and the services they provided.

What we found and tell you about in this report is based on a sample of children and families. We cannot promise that this will be the same for every child in the area who might need help.

A team of inspectors gathered all the information and helped to write this report. These inspectors have experience of working across the range of services involved in protecting children. Inspection teams include professional staff who work in council areas elsewhere in Scotland.

¹ When we refer to children in this report we mean children and young people under the age of 18 years.

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1. The area

West Lothian is situated in mid central Scotland. It covers an area of 427 square kilometres. West Lothian has a population of 166,000 with 23.3% under the age of 18 years compared to the Scottish average of 20.5%.

The number of children referred to the council for child protection enquiries increased between 2006 and 2009. The level of referrals is higher than that for Scotland as a whole. The proportion of children on the Child Protection Register (CPR) in West Lothian is 3.1 per 1000 which is broadly in line with the national average of 2.9 per 1000.

2. Particular strengths that made a difference to children and families

- Staff know children and families very well, understand their needs and what to do to help them.
- Improvements in the life chances of vulnerable children and young people as a result of getting the help they need when they need it.
- Quality of initial response when there are concerns about children, including arrangement for medical assessments.
- Successful working relationships and leadership at all levels, securing successful outcomes for children.
- High quality of leadership from senior managers and the sharing of their vision and values by staff across services.

3. Examples of good practice

- *Operation Floorwalk* which is successfully tackling under-age drinking.
- *Safer Streets Initiative* which is providing a quick and effective response to child and adult victims of domestic abuse.
- Developing the skills of staff to assess risk to children and young people.

4. How well are the needs of children and families met?

Children have a very high level of awareness of their right to be safe and well. They have reliable adults they can contact if they need help. Vulnerable children receive very effective support and sound advice and, as a result, are confident in keeping themselves safe. Staff across services work well together to help children develop the skills they need to keep themselves safe in school, in the community and when using mobile phones and the internet. Vulnerable children and families benefit greatly from the outstanding support they receive at an early stage. A very wide range of services provides high quality advice and practical help. Staff across services skilfully adapt the assistance they provide to meet the child and family's individual needs. Children and families experiencing domestic abuse get the help they need quickly. Vulnerable pregnant women are identified early and receive very effective and helpful support before their babies are born. Parents are helped to become more confident in how they manage their children's behaviour and encourage their development. The lives of children and families are significantly better because of the help they get.

Staff are very alert to children who may be at risk of harm. They treat any concerns raised seriously and respond very promptly to make children safe. Social workers and staff in police and health quickly share information and carefully plan what they are going to do to make sure these children get all the help they need. Children and families benefit from careful explanations about what is going to happen next and they are very well-supported throughout child protection investigations.

Children are safer because of very effective actions taken to protect them and quickly develop trusting relationships with staff. Staff use legal measures appropriately to keep children safe and find suitable places for them to live when it is no longer safe for them to remain at home.

Services are having a very positive impact on the lives of children in need of protection and their families. Staff work very well together to carefully consider their needs and make very helpful plans to meet them. They make sure that children get the help they need to meet their short and long term needs. There are a wide range of successful services which help children to recover from abuse and the distress it causes them. Children who have experienced sexual abuse get particularly helpful support. Staff work together to build children's confidence and self-esteem and provide a wide range of support to meet their health needs. Children who are looked after away from home benefit from staff who pay close attention to meeting their needs. Children get the help they need at the right time and this help continues for as long as they need it.

Staff are very alert to children who go missing from school or nursery and follow very robust procedures to make sure they are found. Staff, across services are very clear about what action to take when children run away from home. They quickly plan what they will do to trace these children and make sure that they identify those who may need extra support to stay safe. The Child Protection Committee (CPC) has prepared useful guidance and provided training to help staff respond to children who may have been brought into or moved around the country illegally and are at risk of harm. Services have given a high priority to raising awareness of the needs of gay and lesbian young people. The recently established *LGBT Youth Forum* is working positively to put in place relevant services for these young people.

Children and families benefit from very effective communication with staff. Staff take time to know them very well and listen carefully to them. They are able to express their views and these are taken seriously. Staff pay very close attention to the needs of babies, younger children and those who have difficulty in expressing their feelings. They are skilled at making sense of changes in their behaviour. Children and families benefit from very trusting relationships with staff that they see regularly. They are confident staff will respond to their requests for help and trust them to take the action needed to make things better.

5. How good is the management and delivery of services?

Across services, staff share information to protect children. This includes staff responsible for assessing sex offenders who may pose a risk to children. Workers have benefited from high quality training and from the provision of helpful documents to identify risks and needs. Significant improvements have been made in assessment and planning for children. Most child protection plans are now based on better assessments and are resulting in more positive outcomes for children. Health visitors and family centre staff provide very helpful reports to help assess risks and needs. Education managers are helping staff to improve the quality and consistency of their child protection reports by providing effective training.

The arrangements for medical assessment for children where concerns have been raised are outstanding. A doctor with specialist child protection knowledge is available for advice at all times and is fully involved in planning to investigate concerns. Children's individual needs are carefully considered and they are given very helpful support at all stages. Additional health needs are followed up quickly and effectively.

Staff take care to involve parents in meetings which are held to discuss plans for their children. In almost all cases, suitable arrangements are made to ensure children's views are understood and taken into account when important decisions are being made about their lives. Parents feel that staff give them valuable help to understand what they need to do to reduce the risks to their children. Decisions about children referred to the Children's Reporter are now taken more promptly. Children's Hearings are now held in a child-friendly place. Managers are improving planning documents to record more clearly the actions needed to address children's wider and longer-term needs as well as immediate risks.

Senior managers are strongly committed to helping staff review their work. They ensure workers are clear on how to improve their practice from lessons learned both locally and nationally. Staff regularly review important aspects of their work. Managers across services take a

close look at case records and jointly monitor the quality of risk assessments. They are considering how to involve children and families in reviewing services. The CPC now needs to review carefully how it can demonstrate the ways in which better working practices have improved the lives of children in need of protection.

6. How good is leadership and direction?

Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders Executive Group (ELBEG) and Chief Officers in West Lothian have set out a very clear vision and very strong values for improving the life chances of children in need of protection. These have been shared very effectively with managers and staff who are working directly with children and families. The Chief Officers Group (COG) gives very strong direction to staff in their work to keep children safe. All relevant business and improvement plans are driven by their common goal to improve the safety and well-being of children. Community Planning is built around meeting the needs of different age groups, focuses on improving outcomes and gives a high priority to child protection. The COG has recognised the need to further strengthen joint planning and has put in place new arrangements which raise the profile and responsibilities of the CPC. The COG leads by example in developing positive and purposeful relationships which promote effective team working. Staff are proud of their services and of the work they do together to help keep children safe.

7. How are services improving?

Services are making significant progress in increasing the effectiveness of their work to protect children. The Integrated Children's Services Plan (ICSP) identifies clearly the outcomes managers want to achieve, including those for child protection. The Children's Service Management Group checks progress against the plan's targets very carefully and this is helping to improve life chances for the most vulnerable children and families. Improved Community Planning arrangements will link the work of the CPC more closely to

the Community Safety Partnership. Joint strategic planning is focused clearly on the difference services can make to the lives of children and families and ensuring that families get the help they need when they need it.

The CPC has carried out audits and quality assurance of the child protection work of staff across key services. It now needs to make sure that its improvement planning is more closely linked to the ICSP and concentrates more fully on improving outcomes for children in need of protection.

Following our last inspection, a number of areas for improvement were agreed and the CPC has put in place a work plan to address these. Significant progress has been made in the quality of assessment of risk, planning to meet individual needs and in the service provided by the Children's Reporter.

8. What happens next?

We are confident that the services will be able to make the necessary improvements in light of the inspection findings. As a result, we will make no further visits in connection with the inspection. Our link inspector will maintain contact with services to support improvements.

We have agreed the following areas for improvement with services in the West Lothian Council area.

- Strengthen further the Child Protection Committee's approach to reviewing their work to ensure a sharper focus on improving outcomes for vulnerable children.
- Build on the work already done to further improve the assessment of risk and needs.

Quality indicators help services and inspectors to judge what is good and what needs to be improved in the work to protect children and meet their needs. You can find these quality indicators in the HMIE publication *How well do we protect children and meet their needs?* Following the inspection of each local authority area, the Scottish Government gathers evaluations of four important quality indicators to keep track of how well services across Scotland are doing to protect children and meet their needs.

Here are the evaluations of these for the West Lothian Council area.

Children are listened to and respected	very good
Children are helped to keep safe	excellent
Response to immediate concerns	very good
Meeting needs and reducing long term harm	very good

We also evaluated the following aspects of the work within the local authority area.

Self-evaluation	good
Improvements in performance	very good

Clare Lamont
HM Inspector
October 2010

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This report uses the following word scale to make clear judgements made by inspectors.

excellent	outstanding, sector leading
very good	major strengths
good	important strengths with some areas for improvement
satisfactory	strengths just outweigh weaknesses
weak	important weaknesses
unsatisfactory	major weaknesses

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