

29 January 2010

Ms Jane Humphreys
Corporate Director, Children, Education and Social Care
Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council
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Church Road
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Dear Ms Humphreys

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Stockton-on-Tees 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 Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council which was conducted on 5 and 6 January 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 two 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 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 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:

- Appropriate decisions are taken and recorded in respect of contacts and referrals that require assessment. Children and young people who are at risk of immediate harm are correctly identified.

- Qualified and experienced senior practitioners complete all initial assessments undertaken by the duty team. The quality of completed initial and core assessments is satisfactory overall.
- Children are involved in assessments and their views are generally recorded. Good examples of children being enabled to share their worries and concerns were seen.
- Assessments demonstrate that racial, cultural and linguistic needs are satisfactorily considered. Some assessments demonstrate that these issues are discussed in detail. Access to interpreters is good.
- A range of agencies appropriately contribute to strategy meetings and child protection enquiries. This ensures that a wide range of information is appropriately scrutinised.
- Completed child protection enquiries reviewed by inspectors were undertaken promptly by qualified and experienced social workers. Risks were satisfactorily identified, analysed and addressed.
- Staff are able to access a suitable range of training. They receive good encouragement and support to become involved in offering placements for social work students.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Staff are committed to delivering positive outcomes for children. They value the involvement and interest shown by senior managers and are offered good opportunities to contribute to developing the service. ▪ Senior managers have clearly recognised the need to increase the council's capacity to respond to referrals. This has been strengthened through the creation of a central duty team which has provided additional capacity and has enabled staff in the integrated support teams to focus on longer term work.
Areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Senior managers have taken firm action to tackle weaknesses in the current contact, referral and assessment arrangements and this is on going. This includes improvements to operational procedures and modifications to the electronic recording system. An external audit has been recently undertaken which identified a number of required improvements and an action plan is in place. However, this is not yet sufficiently robust or comprehensive and is subject to further development.

- The frequency and quality of supervision are variable across the teams involved in completing assessments. Records do not sufficiently demonstrate that practice is critically analysed. There is inconsistency in the transfer of decisions reached in supervision on to electronic records.
- Frontline managers only receive limited performance management information and analysis to assist them in managing workflow and the timely completion of assessments.
- The Joint Area Review in 2008 recommended that the quality assurance of practice be improved. Action to respond to this has been slow. A systematic process involving managers at all levels has only very recently been put in place and cannot yet demonstrate impact.
- The common assessment framework is not sufficiently embedded in practice. It is not used to identify children who require specialist social care support. This results in some referrals to social care where families have not benefited from multi-agency support at an earlier stage.
- The quality of referrals from other agencies is variable. Some identify risk and needs well, while others lack detail and clarity. A proportion of referrals are not made in a timely way. Inspectors identified examples where, although efforts were made to obtain information from relevant agencies, a prompt response was not received. This limits the thoroughness with which children's needs are assessed.
- Unqualified staff, whose role it is to clarify information at initial contact, do not have on-site access to a manager during periods of absence or leave. The deputising arrangements for other managers involved in the front line duty service are also insufficiently robust. This potentially leaves staff without adequate managerial oversight and support.
- Inspectors identified a number of examples of significant delay in the timely recording of work. However, reported timeliness of assessments is above similar areas and national averages. Senior managers acknowledge that inaccurate data have been submitted, and that current performance is below that previously reported. Action is being taken to ensure that performance will now be reported accurately.

This visit has identified the following areas for priority action.

Areas for priority action

- In a significant proportion of cases examined, inspectors were unable to ascertain from electronic recording that children had been seen and their needs for protection had been appropriately or promptly assessed. These cases were brought to the attention of the council. Immediate action was

taken to review each case and ensure that all the children concerned were safe. The identified issues varied but included a lack of recognition of potential risk; inappropriate closure of cases before risk had been properly assessed; unacceptable delays in commencing assessment and poor recording. Senior managers gave a prompt undertaking to thoroughly review the cases of all children currently involved with the service to ensure that their needs are being addressed.

- Information sharing between the probation service and the council in respect of convicted adults who pose a risk to children is poor. The information lacks important detail about the identified risks, is dealt with as an administrative matter and is not properly clarified. The opportunity to assess the potential risks to children is not taken and this work is not subject to sufficient management oversight and scrutiny.

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

Mary Varley
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Neil Schneider, Chief Executive, Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council
Jane Humphreys, Chair of Stockton-on-Tees Safeguarding Children Board
Councillor Alexander Cunningham, Lead Member for Children, Education and Social Care, Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families