

17 June 2010

Mrs Susan Richardson
Director of Children and Young People's Service
St Helens Metropolitan Borough Council
Atlas House
Corporation Street
St Helens
WA10 4ND

Dear Mrs Richardson

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within St Helens Metropolitan Borough 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 St Helens Metropolitan Borough Council which was conducted on 18 and 19 May 2010. 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 strength and satisfactory practice, with some areas for development.

From the evidence gathered, the following features of the service were identified:

Strengths

- Staff receive good levels of line management supervision and support. Staff and team managers report that senior managers are very accessible, and ensure that urgent decision making is fully supported. The co-location of senior managers and front line teams within Atlas House has been broadly welcomed.



- Performance management systems are effective at delivering high quality and timely data to managers that enable good oversight of individual, team and service performance. Inspectors saw evidence of this making a good contribution to supporting service improvements.
- Dedicated and experienced admin staff placed within front line teams provide high quality support to social workers and managers. This ensures for example that there is a timely recording of line management decisions and of supervision records.
- A comprehensive audit of safeguarding following the Laming review, including contact, referral and assessment provision, has led to substantial increases of resources being made available to improve the capacity of front line services. This has resulted in additional social work and management posts.

Satisfactory practice

- Children and families are routinely seen within assessments and their views and contributions are fully recorded and inform assessments.
- Staff and managers report the electronic recording system is effective, with good quality support and training readily available.
- The council has very recently implemented a new model for the Contact Centre which now ensures that all children's social care contacts are screened by qualified social workers. This has begun to have a positive impact by substantially reducing the numbers of referrals being received by front line teams.
- The working relationships between the Integrated Disability Team and front line services are good, with satisfactory transfer arrangements in place. The team has successfully adapted to changes in their role, including making effective use of specialist skills within their extended responsibility for investigating safeguarding concerns.
- Regular case file audits are conducted across all teams. Issues are followed up and inform individual, team and service improvements.
- There are satisfactory training and personal development opportunities for social work staff, targeted towards priority areas for the council.
- There has been a significant investment in developing the use of the common assessment framework (CAF) across partner agencies. However, there is only limited evidence that CAFs are being effectively used to reduce the need for referral to children's services.

Areas for development

- There is a high turnover of social work staff and team managers within front line services. This means that there is not continuity of support for children and families and that staff morale is low. The council has taken a number of appropriate steps to address these problems, although it is too soon for these

to have an impact.

- Caseloads are very high for some staff and the breadth of work covering statutory and duty commitments is too wide to ensure tasks are always completed in a timely way. This contributes to a significant variation in performance between teams.
- Newly qualified staff report that caseloads were not adequately protected when joining the council, but that improvements have been made since January 2010 in providing appropriate levels of mentoring and support.
- Inspectors saw a number of examples of cases where there had been inconsistent management oversight leading to gaps in risk assessments.
- Inspectors found evidence of inappropriate delay in the transfer of a child protection case from the contact centre to front line teams for assessment indicating that there is the potential for children to be left at risk. Thresholds between the contact centre and front line teams are still unclear. External consultation has recently identified the need to increase the capacity of the contact centre, and there has been a prompt response in implementing improvements.
- Agencies making referrals are not routinely informed of the outcome, including on the completion of initial and core assessments.
- The quality of initial and core assessments is not consistent. Information is not always fully recorded, and analysis is insufficiently robust.
- While timescales for the completion of initial and core assessments are generally good and better than for statistical neighbours, inspectors found evidence of delays in work being completed.

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

Yours sincerely

David Asher
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Carole Hudson, Chief Executive, St Helens Metropolitan Borough Council
Nancy Palmer, Chair of St Helens Safeguarding Children Board
Councillor Eric Smith, Lead Member for Children's Services, St Helens
Metropolitan Borough Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education