

PROTECT: INSPECTION

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Mrs Helen Watson
Corporate Director of Adults, Children and Families
South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council
Town Hall and Civic Offices
Westoe Road
South Shields
Tyne and Wear
NE33 2RL

Dear Mrs Watson

Annual unannounced inspection of South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council contact, referral and assessment arrangements within 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 South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council which was conducted on 15 and 16 September 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 areas of practice that met requirements, with some areas for development.

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

Strengths

- Newly qualified social workers speak highly of the support provided by managers. This includes an induction programme, protected caseloads and good quality, regular supervision to help their professional development.

- Social work staff value good, timely access to managers and senior practitioners to assist in robust decision making in safeguarding cases.
- High numbers of initial and core assessments are completed in a timely manner. The council's recent data suggests that this is better than statistical neighbours and the national average.

The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas

- Sound capacity planning has taken place to ensure that the referral and assessment service is resourced by permanent social workers, reducing reliance on agency staff.
- Social work staff have manageable caseloads, which enables a timely response to safeguard children and young people.
- Transfer of cases to long term teams is well managed and timely. This results in the referral and assessment team having good capacity to undertake their work. Record keeping on the electronic recording system is up-to-date and facilitates good decision making and effective planning.
- Effective partnership arrangements with the police and health are in place to support decision making with regards to Section 47 strategy discussions. Child protection enquiries are undertaken promptly and in line with statutory requirements by appropriately qualified social workers.
- The quality of initial and core assessments seen by inspectors is at least satisfactory. Risk and protective factors are identified although in some cases, assessments were too descriptive and lacked a sharp focus. Assessments demonstrate that children and young people are spoken to as part of their assessment, but there was limited evidence that children were seen alone.
- Managers, senior managers and the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) undertake robust audits of the referral and assessment service, including audits of initial and core assessments and numbers of children subject to a child protection plan. Appropriate actions are identified to minimise risk and continue to improve the service.
- Suitable attention is given to address the diverse needs of children and families. There are effective links with minority ethnic groups and interpretation services are used to aid effective communication.
- Clear communication systems and well established links with the out-of-hours service results in effective information sharing.

Areas for development

- The Integrated Children's System (ICS) is not used to its full potential for the recording of management decisions. Whilst manager's record decision making

in case notes they do not routinely sign off assessments electronically.

- Whilst there is evidence of appropriate supervision case recording on the Integrated Children's System (ICS), this is not reflected in staff supervision files which lack consistent structure and content. There is limited evidence of reflective case discussion to aid professional development.
- The service receives a significant number of contacts and referrals, with a large number relating to domestic violence incidents. A joint domestic violence protocol with the police is not in place, and there is currently no screening of domestic violence contacts, which generates additional work for the service.
- The common assessment framework (CAF) is not embedded across the partnership. This results in a significant number of low level referrals being inappropriately dealt with by the referral and assessment team.

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

Yours sincerely

Marie McGuinness
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Martin Swales, Chief Executive, South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council
Barbara Williams, Independent Chair of South Tyneside Safeguarding Children Board
Councillor Jim Foreman, Lead Member for Children's Services, South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families