

9 June 2011

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

**Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Stockton-on-Tees 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 Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council which was conducted on 10 and 11 May 2011. 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, and administrative staff.

The inspection identified areas of practice that met requirements, with some areas for development.

The areas of priority action identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements on 5 and 6 January 2010 have been addressed. In the cases seen by inspectors, assessments were commenced promptly and risk was suitably addressed. Information about convicted adults who pose a risk to children is shared between probation and the Referral and Assessment Service and relevant assessments are undertaken appropriately.

All but two areas of development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements on 5 and 6 January 2010 have been



addressed. An established case file quality audit system is in place. The common assessment framework is becoming increasingly embedded in practice and there is improved access to performance information for front line managers. Management capacity has grown and the quality of referrals from local agencies has improved. However, insufficient progress has been made with regard to two previous areas of development, in respect of delays in the completion of assessments and the frequency and quality of supervision.

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

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

- The local authority has taken effective action to increase management and practitioner capacity within the Referral and Assessment Service, including the co-location of teams and enhanced duty arrangements. This has strengthened day-to-day management oversight and decision making. Despite a significant increase in the number of referrals, staff caseloads are manageable.
- Decision making regarding children at risk of significant harm is effective. Prompt action is taken to protect children. Child protection enquiries are timely, and appropriately identify and analyse risk.
- The quality of assessments is satisfactory overall. Inspectors saw some examples of effective information gathering and risk analysis, with plans that flowed logically from the assessment of need. Partner agencies and families are suitably involved in assessments, which are appropriately child-centred.
- The diverse needs of children and families is given due attention within assessments.
- Strategy discussions are routinely held as face-to-face meetings and attendance by relevant agencies is good. Planned actions are specific with clear accountabilities and appropriate consideration of the needs of children.
- Unallocated casework arising from staff sickness or turnover is appropriately risk-assessed and managed.
- Suitably qualified and experienced practitioners undertake all initial and core assessments and all child protection investigations.
- Staff within the First Contact Team have access to a manager at all times. Clear deputising arrangements for managers in the Referral and Assessment Service are in place and have been recently further enhanced by the establishment of an additional deputy manager post. This was an area of development at the previous inspection.
- Out of hours arrangements are well established, with appropriate links to

daytime services.

- Progress has been made to embed the common assessment framework in practice across partner agencies. Training has been re-launched, and there is a stronger multi-agency oversight of its implementation. Inter-agency thresholds of intervention are established. The number of assessments completed under the framework has increased significantly. This was an area of development at the previous inspection.
- Systematic quality audits of assessments, involving managers at all levels, are routinely undertaken and there are clear reporting mechanisms to senior management, Stockton Safeguarding Children Board, and individual practitioners. This was an area of development at the previous inspection.
- Front line managers receive appropriate and timely management information to assist their monitoring of performance. This was an area of development at the previous inspection.
- Staff report good access to a range of relevant developmental opportunities.

#### **Areas for development**

- Case recording is not sufficiently up to date, and does not consistently reflect the quality of work undertaken.
- Management oversight and decision making is not consistently evident on case records.
- Action taken in respect of children subject of child protection plans who move into the area from other authorities are unnecessarily and incorrectly recorded as child protection enquiries. This results in inaccurate reporting of the number of child protection enquiries that have taken place.
- The overall quality of referrals from partner agencies has improved; however, there is a need to further reduce the number of inappropriate referrals. The council and its partners recognise this and are taking remedial action. This was an area of development at the previous inspection.
- The frequency and quality of supervision arrangements is not in accordance with the authority's requirements. Supervision files do not sufficiently evidence case discussions or that social workers are being supervised at the required frequency. Decisions taken during supervision of duty team staff are not entered onto the electronic recording system. This was an area of development at the previous inspection.
- Timeliness of assessments is now accurately reported, and senior managers take an active oversight of performance, however, the completion of assessments is still not sufficiently timely. Reasons for delays are not always

recorded clearly. This was an area of development at the previous inspection.

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

Yours sincerely

**Matthew Brazier**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

Copy: Neil Schneider, Chief Executive, Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council  
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education