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Mr Paul Greenhalgh
Corporate Director Children and Learning
Southend-on-Sea Borough Council
Civic Centre
Victoria Avenue
Southend-on-Sea
Essex
SS2 6ER

Dear Mr Greenhalgh

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Southend-on-Sea 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 Southend-on-Sea Borough Council which was conducted on 25 and 26 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
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Staff morale is high and is accompanied by a strong commitment at all levels to continually improve the duty and assessment service.



- The improved recruitment of permanent social workers has led to good stability and has reduced pressures on front line staff.
- A substantial and appropriate range of performance management information is collected and used to support operational management and development of the duty and assessment service.
- The local authority and Local Safeguarding Children Board actively promote a well regarded range of effective training and development opportunities, which include lessons from serious case reviews.

Satisfactory practice

- Good partnership working and a well established and integrated common assessment framework process are being used to provide effective support to vulnerable families. Thresholds are clear and well understood by partner agencies.
- There are effective systems to process all incoming work with evidence of good managerial oversight. There are no unallocated cases.
- Children and young people are consistently seen during the course of assessments and their wishes and feelings are taken into account.
- Families are appropriately involved in assessment and care planning with satisfactory consideration given to their ethnic, cultural and disability needs.
- Child protection cases are promptly identified and allocated to qualified social workers. There is good partnership working between social care and the police child abuse investigation unit in response to child protection referrals.
- Arrangements for identifying and responding to children with complex disability needs are clear and effective.
- The out-of-hours service is well co-ordinated with daytime services. The transition of work between day and night teams is timely and supported by good communication processes.
- Arrangements for transferring cases between social work teams are effective and timely.
- Social workers have good formal and informal access to their managers at all times. The quality of supervision with regards to case direction is good but evidence of reflection is not always recorded.
- Case file audit processes are well established and contribute to service development.

Areas for development

- The quality of referrals from other agencies is variable and this places additional demands on the duty and assessment service in gathering relevant information.
- Child protection minutes and plans are not always distributed in a timely way to core group members following child protection case conferences.
- Although the quality of assessments is satisfactory overall and some are good, the depth of analysis, including that of risk, is variable.
- Managerial sign off of completed assessments is not consistently recorded on the paper file.

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

Yours sincerely

Derek Churchman
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Robert Tinlin, Chief Executive, Southend-on-Sea Borough Council
Christine Doorly, Chair of Southend-on-Sea Safeguarding Children Board
Councillor Roger Hadley, Lead Member for Children's Services, Southend-on-Sea Borough Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education