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Mr Peter Morgan  
Strategic Director of Children's Services  
Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council  
Merton House  
Stanley Rd  
Bootle  
L20 3JA

Dear Mr Morgan

## **Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council's 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 Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council which was conducted on 22 and 23 September 2009. 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, for which Ofsted will award a rating later in the year.

The inspection identified one area 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, other practitioners 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:

- Children, once identified as in need of protection, are safeguarded through good inter-agency working, including prompt convening of initial child protection conferences.
- Once a decision is made to conduct an initial assessment, visits are undertaken promptly to assess children's needs. The most recent validated



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data show that the proportion of assessments completed within the timescale is low compared to other councils, although the council reports recent improvements.

- The more complex work is undertaken by qualified and committed social workers. Since most of them have limited experience, considerable management support is provided to sustain the service.
- There are systems in place to audit the quality of case files and supervision records. Evidence was seen of feedback to workers and managers designed to improve practice and there was some evidence of change as a result.
- Senior managers have recognised there are areas for improvement in service delivery. An improvement plan is in place but is yet to have an impact.

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

<b>Strengths</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Staff and managers demonstrate enthusiasm and commitment in working as a team to respond to the incoming work.</li> <li>▪ Staff feel well supported by accessible and experienced managers who are available to provide timely advice to social workers.</li> <li>▪ There is evidence of good inter-agency working in complex cases. There has been a recent joint operation with the police to investigate organised abuse, resulting in convictions.</li> <li>▪ There is evidence of good inter-agency working at a strategic level. The Sefton Safeguarding Children Board contributed to a recent sub regional review of child protection arrangements, including an audit of selected files, following the Laming Report. The Board is overseeing the implementation of the action plan based on the findings from this review and the Laming Report.</li> </ul>
<b>Areas for development</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The ability of the assessment team to respond appropriately to initial contacts is compromised by the high volume received and the variable quality of the information. The council has deployed a qualified and experienced social worker from the assessment team to the separately located contact team. This is reported to have had some impact in reducing the work referred to the assessment team and in improving the clarity and quality of information, although the council accepts further improvement is needed.</li> </ul>

- There is insufficient focus on the needs and views of children in assessments. As a result, their views and wishes are not taken sufficiently into account.
- Management capacity within the assessment team is insufficient to ensure robust decision making at key points of transition. The problems with recruitment and retention of managers have exacerbated this and resulted in disruption of management arrangements and a lack of management capacity to undertake all essential tasks.
- Staff do not receive sufficient formal supervision. Recording does not always clearly provide evidence of the discussion and decisions reached, nor the learning and development needs of workers.
- Pressures on the assessment team are compounded by delays in the transfer of work to other social care teams. The council reports that these teams are also insufficiently resourced. This means there is delay in providing services to children and families and a reduction in the capacity of the assessment team workers to focus on assessments.
- Some referrals from partner agencies, including the police and the hospital, lack clarity, resulting in increased work for the assessment team in seeking the basic information required.
- Social workers find the computer system of the council's integrated children's services to be slow and cumbersome, reducing the time available to deploy their professional skills in direct work with children and families. The printed assessment forms are not user friendly, which is a barrier to engaging children and families in their assessment.
- Inter-agency working to support families through use of the common assessment framework (CAF) is in the early stages of development. This in turn contributes to the high volume of contacts, some of whom could be more appropriately assisted through the CAF process. There is recent evidence of increasing use of CAF, although the scheme has yet to be fully rolled out to all areas.
- The poor condition of the accommodation provided for the South Assessment Team makes it difficult to conduct successful meetings and interviews with children and families in the office.

This visit has identified the following area for priority action.

**Area for priority action**

- Case files seen during the inspection revealed that the risks to the safety of some children are not always appropriately identified. As a result, the circumstances of some children are not always fully investigated before closure and children are not always seen. This practice is not consistent with

guidance in 'Working Together to Safeguard Children'. This was brought to the immediate attention of council managers, who accepted the findings and acted promptly to ensure cases identified were further investigated to ensure the safety of these children.

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



Heather Brown HMI  
Divisional Manager, Social Care Safeguarding

Copy: Margaret Carney, Chief Executive, Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council  
Ian Rush, Chair of Sefton Safeguarding Children Board  
Peter Dowd, Lead Member for Children's Services, Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council  
Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families