

21 July 2010

Mr Keith Moore  
Acting Executive Director, Children's Services  
Sunderland City Council  
Civic Centre  
Burdon Road  
Sunderland  
SR2 7DN

Dear Mr Moore

**Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Sunderland City 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 Sunderland City Council which was conducted on 22 and 23 June 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 and other practitioners.

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**

- There is a strong commitment from Sunderland City Council to financially support children's services in response to the increasing demands on the service.
- Senior managers have a good awareness of the strengths and areas which need further development in the contact, initial assessment and immediate response teams. There are clear plans to further improve the quality of front



line social work services.

- Trained and experienced staff provide a good assessment service for children with a disability. There is good and responsive contact with these children and young people using a variety of communication tools and methods.

### **Satisfactory practice**

- There is a prompt response to safeguarding concerns across the social work teams.
- All of the children and families teams who carry out assessments are staffed by suitably qualified and experienced workers.
- In all assessments children are seen and interviewed in a timely and appropriate manner.
- Committed and enthusiastic staff report that they have access to relevant training and regular formal supervision and support. There are also good arrangements in place to support newly qualified workers. Managers are readily available for consultation on a daily basis.
- The common assessment framework is increasingly being used by agencies to provide earlier support to prevent family breakdown.
- Out-of-hours social work support, including an emergency response, is available and links well with the daytime services.
- The Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board run briefing sessions for social workers on the learning from serious case reviews. The staff report that these are good and assist them in their day-to-day work.
- There is recognition of the ethnicity and diversity needs of families, by social workers carrying out assessments, leading to appropriate services being provided to meet their needs.

### **Areas for development**

- A high number of contacts are received on a monthly basis from the Northumbria Police. Many of these lack clarity on the reason for involving children's social care. The Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board, local authority and the police are working together to ensure better prioritisation and presentation of these referrals.
- There is a programme of quality assurance audits and ongoing work by managers to scrutinise decision making on individual cases. Although examples were seen of this having a positive effect on the quality of recording and

practice in some teams, this has yet to be embedded across all of the teams.

- The local authority Integrated Children's System requires lengthy input from workers and managers. Due to the volume of recording required for the electronic records, social workers spend too long completing forms and documents which have significant duplication. Some completed forms are also missing important information.
- Managers do not routinely sign-off contacts when a decision has been made not to carry out an assessment. Managers have an overview of these cases, but there is a gap in the recording of their involvement in this aspect of decision making.

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

Yours sincerely

**Neil Penswick**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

Copy: Dave Smith, Chief Executive Officer, Sunderland City Council  
Jan Van Wagtendonk, Chair of Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board  
Councillor Patricia Smith, Portfolio Holder for Children and Learning,  
Sunderland City Council  
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education