

31 March 2011

Mr Bob Hepworth
Interim Director for Children and Young People's Services
St Helens Metropolitan Borough Council
Atlas House
Corporation Street
St Helens
WA9 1ND

Dear Mr Hepworth

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within St Helens Metropolitan 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 St Helens Metropolitan Borough Council which was conducted on 2 and 3 March 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, other practitioners and administrative staff.

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

Most of the areas for development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in May 2010 have been addressed but there remain outstanding areas for development; social work caseloads remain high and some are in excess of the expectations of the council's workload management scheme; in addition, some newly qualified social workers (NQSWS) have caseloads that are still not adequately protected in terms of the level of complexity and risk involved; the quality of initial and core assessments is variable and analysis in some cases remains weak.



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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The First Response Service is dealing promptly and effectively with all contacts made by professionals and families. The service is well integrated with the emergency duty team and area teams. The weekly referral meeting is good practice, examining all contacts and decisions to transfer cases to area teams or other agencies. This is bringing critical reflection to a key interface and promoting consistency in the application of thresholds. This has also led to a significant reduction in the number of inappropriate contacts being passed on to the area teams and improvement in the quality of service offered at this first point of contact.
The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Over the past 12 months the council has worked hard to achieve a more stable workforce. While this is a significant achievement within a short timescale, it is too early to fully demonstrate impact. ▪ The performance management systems are established across the management group and support good practice. Overall most case work seen by inspectors was completed within satisfactory timescales. ▪ Overall, practice seen by inspectors effectively manages risk of harm and contributes to improving outcomes for children and young people. ▪ There has been improvement in the range and effectiveness of the use of the common assessment framework (CAF), including the introduction of eCAF in June 2010. Inspectors found evidence of increased involvement by partner agencies, which is supported through the relocation of the CAF coordinator into the First Response Team. ▪ A new inter-agency threshold document, the St Helens Continuum of Need, has been agreed across all agencies and is implemented efficiently and effectively to ensure that referrals are responded to promptly. ▪ Appropriate attention is given to the diverse needs of children in assessments. ▪ In most cases records seen were up-to-date with evidence of good multi-agency working and the participation of children and parents. ▪ Supervision files demonstrate that in most cases staff are receiving appropriate levels of supervision and support, although there was little evidence of critically reflective supervision. Newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) receive extra support from the NQSW coordinator. ▪ Staff reported to inspectors that they are supported by their line managers;

the open door approach provides for easy access to managers, including the senior management team, and is valued by staff.

- There is evidence of good engagement with partner agencies and, in particular, strong partnership working with the police.
- Section 47 enquiries are carried out by qualified social workers who have completed basic multi-agency safeguarding training.

Areas for development

- Inspectors identified two child protection cases where there was insufficient and ineffective management oversight and failure to follow child protection procedures, potentially placing children at risk. In one case there was significant delay in making a referral into the child protection system and reaching clear plans for an unborn child with an over-reliance on the Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements.
- Caseloads are generally too high and are in excess of the expectations of the council's workload management scheme.
- As highlighted in the last inspection some NQSWs undertaking child protection work are not always adequately protected in terms of the level of complexity and risk involved. While the support to NQSWs has improved, workloads of inexperienced staff remain an area for development.
- The level of re-referrals remains too high. Some work has been undertaken to analyse the reasons for this but the impact of the work is not apparent.
- The quality of initial and core assessments is variable and analysis in some cases is insufficient and remains an area for development.
- Case file audits are not sufficiently rigorous and the arrangements for follow up action are not clear. Consequently this impacts on the effectiveness of quality assurance arrangements resulting in poor practice not being promptly identified leading to drift in the completion of corrective action.

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

Yours sincerely

Mary Candlin
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Carole Hudson, Chief Executive, St Helens Metropolitan Borough Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education