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Ms Sue Cook
Interim Corporate Director of Children and Learning
Southend-on-Sea Borough Council
Civic Centre
Victoria Street
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Essex
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Dear Ms Cook

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Southend-on-Sea 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 Southend-on-Sea Borough Council which was conducted on 12 and 13 April 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 and paper 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 June 2010 have been addressed but the council acknowledges that further sustained improvement is required. However, further improvement in the quality and consistency of assessments is required. This area of work remains an area for development.



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

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| Strengths |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Managers and experienced social work staff are readily accessible to social workers for case discussion, advice and direction. This is highly valued by staff and leads to good morale and low staff turnover, enabling consistency of provision to children and young people. |
| The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Thresholds for access to children's social care services are clear and have recently been reviewed with partner agencies, to improve the awareness and understanding of the criteria across agencies. ▪ Processes for screening and responding to contacts and referrals are robust. This enables relevant information to be gathered in order to facilitate prompt decision making. ▪ Timely decisions are made in response to referrals of children in need and of children in need of protection, with clear management direction given to make clear the actions that are required. ▪ In most cases assessments are timely, and case recording is sufficiently up to date. ▪ Assessments, including Section 47 enquiries, are undertaken by suitably qualified and experienced staff. ▪ Section 47 assessments are well managed and strategy discussions are held in a timely way and are appropriately recorded. ▪ Decisions in relation to assessments are being well recorded and actions required are noted. ▪ The diverse needs of children and young people are appropriately considered within assessments, particularly in relation to children with disabilities. ▪ Good training and personal development opportunities are available to, and accessed by staff. Staff report that they value these highly. ▪ Children are routinely seen as part of the assessment process and in most cases their views are recorded and taken into account. ▪ Effective arrangements are in place for prompt communication and information sharing between the out of hours service and the referral and assessment services. ▪ Arrangements for transfer of cases from the referral and assessment services |

are flexible and effective.

- Robust performance management information is readily available and is regularly accessed by managers. Managers routinely undertake case audits and their findings are used well to improve the intervention in individual cases and to identify issues for service development.

Areas for development

- Most assessments are of a satisfactory standard and some are good. However, the quality is too variable. Some assessments are not sufficiently comprehensive and some lack rigorous analysis. This was an area for development at the previous inspection.
- Notifications of domestic violence incidents by the police to the referral and assessment services are not consistently timely, resulting in delayed assessment in some cases. The council and its partners are taking appropriate action to resolve this. In some cases the referral assessment service response to domestic violence notifications is not sufficiently timely.
- Most staff receive regular supervision. However, in some cases there are gaps in the regularity of the recording of supervision.
- The outcome of assessments is not routinely notified to referrers. The council is taking action to correct this.
- While management decisions and directions on referrals requiring further action are clear, the reasons for taking no further action on other cases are not always recorded.

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

Yours sincerely

Pietro Battista
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Rob Tinlin, Chief Executive, Southend-on-Sea Borough Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education