

17 November 2010

Mr Peter Morgan
Strategic Director of Children, Schools and Families
Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council
Merton House
Stanley Road
Bootle
L20 3JA

Dear Mr Morgan

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Sefton 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 Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council which was conducted on 19 and 20 October 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 areas of practice that met requirements, with some areas for development.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none">There has been a significant increase in the use of the common assessment framework (CAF) across the borough. Inspectors saw evidence of good quality early intervention support being provided in a timely way to children, young people and families, including those with more complex needs. CAF is now fully embedded within a wide range of agencies, and is also systematically



used as an appropriate outcome following children's social care referrals and initial assessments.

The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas

- All assessments are undertaken by appropriately qualified social workers with support from experienced family support workers.
- The council has been successful in securing workforce stability within the assessment teams through recruiting permanent social work staff and team managers. This has largely reduced the reliance on agency staff and has contributed to an improvement in staff morale.
- Inspectors saw evidence of children being seen alone during assessments, and their views had been appropriately sought and taken into account in most cases.
- A thorough policy for regular and comprehensive case file and thematic auditing has been implemented over the past year. This is undertaken by all tiers of management with a clear reporting mechanism to the Local Safeguarding Children Board. This provides an effective framework to regularly monitor the quality of services and to drive forward improvement.
- Newly qualified staff report that they receive satisfactory induction and good quality training and learning opportunities. Robust action has recently been taken to ensure that newly qualified staff do not hold child protection cases.
- The attachment of an assistant team manager to the contact centre provides appropriate screening for all children's social care contacts made to the council. This has contributed to the reduction in numbers of referrals despite increasing numbers of contacts.
- Domestic violence referrals from the police are now effectively screened through the attachment of an assistant team manager within the police family crime investigation unit. This ensures parents and children subject to domestic violence are appropriately signposted to services and that there is an early identification of risk.
- Weekly transfer meetings attended by a range of relevant children's services managers ensure a timely and appropriate transfer of cases. The process is supported by an effective file auditing tool.
- Swift action was taken following the first unannounced inspection to accommodate the two south assessment teams within more suitable accommodation. This has also provided opportunities for improved multi-agency working.

Areas for development

- Inspectors found some evidence of contacts being prematurely closed, despite indication of potential risk to vulnerable children and young people. The council promptly ensured that appropriate action was taken in the cases identified to confirm that children and young people were safe and their needs were being met.
- Strategy meetings do not always take place in a timely manner following a child protection referral, due to poor preparation and planning. This can result in a delay in investigating child protection concerns and places children at potential risk of harm.
- The quality of initial and core assessments is variable. Analysis is not always sufficiently rigorous leading to poor identification of the needs of children and young people.
- Some caseloads within assessment teams are excessively high. This impacts on the worker's ability to complete work and delays some children receiving services in a timely way.
- Most staff report that supervision is regular, supportive and challenging. However, while case discussion and decision making is recorded within supervision files, this is not routinely added to children's electronic or paper case files, which is not compliant with the supervision policy.
- The council has a number of non-integrated electronic and paper recording systems which continue to be a barrier to management oversight and to efficient case management by staff at all levels.

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

Yours sincerely

David Asher
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Margaret Carney, Chief Executive, Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council
Ian Rush, Chair of Sefton Safeguarding Children Board
Ian Monkur, Lead Member for Children's Services, Sefton
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Andrew Spencer, Department for Education