

10 June 2010

Ms Sheila Smith
Director of Children's Services
North Somerset Council
Town Hall
Walliscote Grove Road
Weston-super-Mare
BS23 1UJ

Dear Ms Smith

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within North Somerset 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 North Somerset Council which was conducted on 11 and 12 May 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 satisfactory practice, with some areas for development.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Child protection investigations that are undertaken in accordance with the Section 47 Children Act 1989 are managed effectively. Strong working relationships with the police result in timely and high quality investigations with good management oversight and decision-making.



- The effective implementation of multi-agency locality teams, the common assessment framework and the 'Team around the Child' approach ensure timely and appropriate plans are made to provide resources to children and young people requiring additional support.
- Lessons from serious case reviews are disseminated well to all relevant staff through a series of events and workshops organised by the Local Safeguarding Children Board. This has led to improvements in practice with regard to recording on case files and ensuring that children are seen alone when undertaking an assessment of their needs.
- Case file audits are used effectively to monitor and improve the quality of services provided by the referral and assessment team. As part of a well-established audit plan, senior managers undertake monthly audits of case files. Identified practice strengths and areas for improvement are then shared with staff through regular management briefings.

Satisfactory practice

- Thresholds for access to children's social care services are well understood and operate effectively across partner agencies.
- Effective administrative systems are in place to ensure that contacts and referrals are clearly recorded and promptly sent through to the appropriate manager.
- All children and young people who require assessment are allocated to suitably qualified and experienced social workers.
- Staff are highly motivated and are supported well by regular supervision and training. Newly qualified staff receive appropriate additional support from managers and undertake the national Newly Qualified Social Worker development programme.
- Children are seen regularly and, where appropriate, alone. Social workers use age-appropriate methods to communicate with children and ensure that their views are accurately recorded and reflected in assessments.
- Case recording is comprehensive and, in most cases, timely.
- Consultation is undertaken with service users to ascertain their views of the services provided and action plans are in place to address relevant findings.
- Well established information-sharing between the emergency duty team and the referral and assessment team ensures that concerns about children and young people are followed up appropriately.

Areas for development

- Due to a shortage of staff in long term teams, protocols for the transfer of cases are not used consistently which results in some children and young people not receiving a timely service.
- The lack of effective tracking and monitoring by first line managers in a small number of cases, where child protection concerns have not been identified, has led to delays in assessment or in the delivery of services.
- The quality of initial and core assessment is variable although recent training initiatives are beginning to show an improvement. However, some still fail to show sufficient analysis of the key factors impacting on the child's well-being.
- The proportionately low rate of referral and contacts in relation to families which come from minority ethnic backgrounds has not been sufficiently analysed.

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

Yours sincerely

Karen McKeown
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Graham Turner, Chief Executive, North Somerset Council
 Philip Durban, Chair of North Somerset Safeguarding Children Board
 Cllr Jeremy Blatchford, Lead Member for Children's Services, North Somerset Council
 Andrew Spencer, Department for Education