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Ms Gill Rollings  
Executive Director, Children, Families and Learning  
Middlesbrough Borough Council  
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Dear Ms Rollings

**Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Middlesbrough 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 Middlesbrough Borough Council which was conducted on 14 and 15 September 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**

- The Council has a robust action plan in place to address known areas for development in the contact, referral and assessment arrangements. This has ensured improvement in key areas of service delivery such as the timely completion of core assessments.

- A wide range of accessible and good quality training is available to staff which is appropriate to their developmental needs. The Council has a strong commitment to support newly qualified staff and for senior staff to undertake professional management qualifications which is leading to high quality social work interventions.
- The Council's strategy for the recruitment and retention of staff has resulted in a stable, experienced and appropriately qualified workforce within the enquiry and assessment team.

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

- The threshold for access to the child protection service is clear, understood by all agencies and has been recently reviewed.
- Children in need of protection including those affected by domestic abuse are appropriately identified and referred by agencies. Referrers are kept informed and consulted during assessments.
- Child protection investigations are undertaken by suitably qualified and experienced social workers and this work is supported by a recently updated procedure for the completion of core assessments. In the cases sampled by inspectors risks are assessed in accordance with national guidance.
- Initial and core assessments on the electronic integrated children's system (ICS) thoroughly explore the risk of harm posed to children and how this can be safely reduced. Where children require protection swift action is taken to ensure they are safe.
- Practice ensures children are seen and their views and those of their family members are sought and considered as part of the assessment process. Assessments examined by inspectors are sensitive to the diverse needs of individual children and their families.
- The arrangements to support children and families where English is not their first language is easily accessible and ensures the effective delivery of services.
- The quality of the common assessments seen by inspectors are of good quality and sharply focused on addressing the needs of families.
- Arrangements for the supervision of social work staff have been strengthened and workers receive planned, regular supervision which provides a good level of challenge and support.
- New arrangements are in place to quality assure the contact, referral and assessment service. This includes the use of regular planned and random management audits which are leading to improvements such as in the quality of core assessments.
- Managers are routinely using data to monitor key areas of performance such as the progress made on assessments and this is being used in performance clinics

to make management decisions on service priorities and the use of resources.

- A new Middlesbrough Safeguarding Children Board has been established led by a recently appointed independent chairperson which has improved the level of challenge across agencies.

#### **Areas for development**

- The criteria for accessing services for children in need is not sufficiently understood by all agencies resulting in a high volume of contacts which is impacting on the enquiry and assessment team's ability to effectively manage the capacity and throughput of work. As a result social work case loads are high in the enquiry and assessment and locality team visited by inspectors.
- Progress has been made on the introduction of the common assessment framework and the range of agencies and number of common assessments completed is increasing. Numbers remain low however and early intervention services are not sufficiently developed to prevent the high rate of contacts being made to the enquiry and assessment team which do not go on to a referral.
- There is a significant backlog of completed work for children in need which is not recorded on the electronic recording system. In these cases the individual hand written records maintained by social workers are not sufficiently robust to support good social work practice and there is no audit trail of management decisions. This practice is leading to drift, impacting on effective inter-agency work and the ability of children's services to assess possible escalating risk.
- There are delays in completed core assessments being entered on the electronic recording system in the locality team visited by inspectors. This results in delay in closing cases identified for no further action and on the accuracy of performance data such as when core assessments are completed. Although a number of strategies are in place to address this progress is too slow.

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

Yours sincerely

**Gary Lamb**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

Copy: Ian Parker, Chief Executive, Middlesbrough Borough Council  
Mark Braithwaite, Chair of Middlesbrough Safeguarding Children Board  
Michael Carr, Lead Member for Children's Services, Middlesbrough Borough Council  
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education