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Ms Nicola Bailey
Director of Child and Adult Services
Hartlepool Borough Council
Civic Centre
Hartlepool
TS24 8AY

Dear Ms Bailey

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Hartlepool 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 Hartlepool Borough Council which was conducted on 15 and 16 February 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.

The five areas for development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in November 2009 have all been fully addressed.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Child protection concerns are responded to promptly by all agencies working with children. Agencies demonstrate a high level of commitment to attending child protection strategy meetings providing relevant information verbally and in writing. Detailed minutes routinely include a full account of known risk and protective factors. This leads to high quality analysis and planning of thorough child-centred child protection enquiries which continue with the full engagement of partner agencies. ▪ Assessments of children’s needs are consistently of high quality. The needs of children and their families are considered fully, including all factors that impact on children’s safety and welfare, and are recorded in detail. This supports good analysis and plans that set out clear, measurable objectives for improving outcomes for children. Assessments are updated promptly to reflect the changing circumstances of children.
The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Practice and procedures comply with statutory requirements and manage risk of harm. They are implemented effectively and ensure that referrals are responded to promptly. ▪ Good attention is given to the diverse needs of children and there is a strong commitment to diversity, particularly in relation to work with children with disabilities. ▪ Decisions regarding further work with children and families such as starting and finalising initial and core assessments are generally made in accordance with the timescales set out in statutory guidance. ▪ Children and family members are routinely involved in their assessments and planning, and their views and feelings are taken into account. ▪ Records of the work undertaken with children are up-to-date, detailed and include evidence of management oversight. ▪ Out-of-hours duty arrangements are clear, robust and linked well to the day referral service with prompt transfer of information. ▪ The experiences and views of children and parents involved in child protection conferences have been gathered in order to improve the ability of family members to contribute to conferences and improve the quality of child protection plans

- A robust quality assurance framework contributes to improving casework practice, management oversight and decision-making.
- Regular critically reflective supervision is provided to staff resulting in improving practice with children and families. Actions that arise from case discussions held in supervision are clearly recorded in the child's file.
- Staff involved in referral and assessment work are suitably qualified and experienced. They attend relevant training courses to update their knowledge.
- Staff workloads are manageable, which enables work to be completed in a timely way.

Areas for development

- Common assessment framework activity remains underdeveloped and there is a high number of referrals to children's social care for children who have not previously received coordinated support from preventative services or where the common assessment was ineffective in meeting their needs. The recent analysis undertaken by the council identifies areas for improvement including increasing the number of agencies undertaking common assessment frameworks, improving the quality of them and ensuring they meet the needs of children and families.

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

Yours sincerely

Sheena Doyle
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Paul Walker, Chief Executive, Hartlepool Borough Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education