

21 May 2010

Mrs Margaret Whellans
Group Director of Learning and Children's Services
Gateshead Council
Civic Centre
Gateshead
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Dear Mrs Whellans

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Gateshead children's services

This letter contains the findings of the recent unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within local authority children's services in Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council which was conducted on 16 and 17 March 2010. The inspection was carried out under section 138 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. It will contribute to Ofsted's annual review of the performance of the authority's children's services.

The inspection identified no areas for priority action but some areas for development, which are detailed below.

The inspection sampled the quality and effectiveness of contact, referral and assessment arrangements and their impact on minimising the incidence of 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. I am grateful to you and your staff for your help and the time given during this inspection.

From the evidence gathered, the inspection identified a number of areas where the contact, referral and assessment arrangements were delivered satisfactorily in accordance with national guidance, in particular:

- Contacts in respect of children in need or those considered to be at risk of harm are prioritised within an agreed multi-agency framework. The system for screening contacts by duty social workers and managers leads to clear and timely decisions and action.



- All cases are allocated to ensure that initial and core assessments and investigations in accordance with section 47 Children Act 1989 (CA 1989) are undertaken in a timely manner by suitably qualified social workers.
- Social workers receive regular supervision and support from their managers who maintain an effective day to day overview of incoming contacts and subsequent action.
- The duty and assessment workforce is stable with minimal reliance on the use of agency staff. Staff value being members of a cohesive duty and assessment team.
- Most children and young people are routinely seen alone during assessments and investigations in accordance with section 47 CA1989 and their views are appropriately considered in care planning.
- Up to date policy and operational procedures provide clear guidance to staff and effective working protocols exist between the assessment and duty team, the children with disabilities team, and the out of hours service.
- The out of hours service provides emergency and generic coverage by experienced and skilled practitioners and is suitably integrated with the day duty and assessment services, the police and health provision.

From the evidence gathered, the following strengths and areas for development were also identified:

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A caseload weighting system ensures a balanced and fair distribution of work within the team. Screening and 'signs of safety' tools are used well by managers working alongside social workers to prioritise further action. ▪ Managers of the duty and assessment team are highly visible and active in monitoring and managing effectively incoming work, fluctuating service pressures, and outcomes. Allocation processes are openly managed and lead to increased team ownership and shared knowledge of complex cases. ▪ Duty social workers utilise direct work tools and methods well to engage children and young people in their assessments and plans. ▪ The provision of a wide range of family support and preventative services reduces the need for higher level interventions in cases that can be supported through the use of the common assessment framework, 'Team-around-the Family', children's centres and specialist support provision.

Areas for development

- The recording of culture, religion, linguistic needs and disability is not fully evidenced in every case and given due weight in the formulation of individual plans.
- Audit systems which are currently available in the borough are not being fully utilised to assure routinely the quality and consistency of assessments or to monitor jointly agreed levels of intervention based on the application of the safety plan tool.
- The integrated recording system does not provide a coherent and accessible audit trail of decisions in all cases to enable managers to track and monitor the progress of work at every stage, including out of hours.
- Typing pool capacity is insufficient in ensuring the timely recording of the assessments which have been undertaken by social workers.

There are no areas for priority action.

Yours sincerely

Martin Ayres
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Roger Kelly, Chief Executive, Gateshead
Paul Moffat, Chair of Gateshead Safeguarding Children Board
Catherine Donovan, Lead Member for Children's Services, Gateshead
Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families