

9 March 2011

Mr David Williams
Corporate Director for Children and Young People's Services
Durham County Council
County Hall
Durham
DH1 5UL

Dear Mr Williams

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Durham County 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 Durham County Council which was conducted on 8 and 9 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 areas of development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in March 2010 have been addressed.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Social workers in the children with disability team use a range of effective approaches to ensure that the views of children and young people, including those unable to express themselves verbally, inform assessments and planning. Their assessments and plans are holistic with very good analysis of the needs of the child, parents, carers and other family members, and result in



effective services.
The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Children suffering or at risk of harm receive a timely and effective service to ensure their safety. Section 47 enquiries are thorough and carried out by suitably qualified and experienced social workers. ▪ The emergency duty team provides a comprehensive service that links effectively with day services to ensure that children are safe and their needs met. ▪ Thresholds for referrals are understood and applied by partner agencies and the initial response team. Referrals seen by inspectors have received a timely response resulting in appropriate action being taken. ▪ Operational partnerships, particularly with police and health providers, are well-developed with effective collaboration and constructive challenge to ensure children's safety. ▪ Use of the common assessment framework is consistently applied across the partnership and effectively supports the delivery of appropriate early intervention services to children, young people and their families. ▪ Cases seen by inspectors indicate that children are routinely seen and spoken to in the assessment process. ▪ Assessment records in most cases seen by inspectors are up-to-date with management decisions clearly recorded. ▪ Audit systems and processes enable managers to review practice and records but the impact of this on service improvement has yet to be fully realised. ▪ Staff workloads are manageable and balanced and no unallocated work was seen. ▪ Staff receive regular critically reflective supervision and report that managers at all levels are approachable and accessible for formal and informal guidance. The authority provides a programme of relevant training and development opportunities that meets a wide range of developmental needs, especially for newly qualified social workers.
Areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The electronic social care record has been improved and now allows managers better oversight of individual casework. However, there remain limitations that do not prevent inaccurate entry of assessment dates and require some duplication of recording. ▪ Not all decisions to close contacts with no further action are seen and agreed

by a manager.

- The quality of assessments is too variable. While some good examples were seen, too many are descriptive and lacking in analysis. The views of parents and extended family members are not consistently recorded. While in most cases seen ethnicity was recorded, in too many cases the wider impact of equality and diversity issues were not explored or applied effectively.

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

Yours sincerely

Simon Rushall
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: George Garlick, Chief Executive, Durham County Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education