

20 October 2010

Mr Murray Rose
Director of Children's Services
Darlington Borough Council
Town Hall
Feethams
Darlington
DL1 5QT

Dear Mr Rose

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Darlington 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 Darlington Borough Council which was conducted on 21 and 22 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

- Strong partnership working arrangements have been established to promote good outcomes for children in need of protection. For example, frequent and regular liaison meetings are held with the consultant paediatrician and relevant designated health staff in respect of children who present at accident and emergency services to ensure best practice in protecting children. Good partnership arrangements are in place with police to undertake Section 47 enquiries in appropriate cases.



- A well-resourced out-of-hours service provides a good level of service, which includes the capacity to undertake welfare check visits, and works well with daytime services to manage risk of harm to children.

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

- Prompt action has been taken by the council in response to some of the areas for development identified at the last inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements. Issues relating to the completion of agency checks and conducting initial assessments have been addressed and additional resources deployed to the childcare planning teams have improved arrangements for the transfer of cases.
- There is a prompt and appropriate response to safeguard children and young people where there are immediate and clear child protection concerns.
- Arrangements for Section 47 strategy meetings and discussions are robust. These take place promptly, involve key professionals and are well recorded.
- A committed and motivated social work team report that they are well supported in their work and have confidence in the leadership of their team manager.
- An experienced and dedicated business support team provide valued support to social workers in their work with children and families.
- Children with disabilities receive sensitive specialist assessment of their needs from a dedicated team for children with disabilities and there are good joint working arrangements in place with the childcare duty team in respect of children who are in need of protection.
- The individual needs of children and families, such as ethnicity, culture or language are appropriately considered and addressed.
- Cases sampled by inspectors demonstrated a child focused approach. Children and young people are routinely seen and their views taken into account as part of their assessment.
- Completed initial and core assessments seen by inspectors are of satisfactory quality.
- The childcare duty team includes an intensive support team that provides valuable support at the most critical stage, when children are at risk of becoming looked after.
- Newly qualified social workers are offered a comprehensive support package which includes mentoring and study days. Social workers have access to a suitable range of training opportunities.

Areas for development

- Duty team social workers continue to carry high caseloads. This impacts on the quality, timely completion and recording of work and results in some children not receiving the services they require. This is recognised by the council and plans are in place to strengthen duty team resources.
- While prompt allocation of cases is a priority, systems to risk assess and manage the small number of children in need cases which are not immediately allocated, are insufficiently rigorous. This is also the case for referrals where further enquiries are necessary before a decision to close or proceed to assessment can be made.
- There is a lack of clarity about the distinction between contacts and referrals and this is resulting in inaccurate data completion relating to this area of work.
- While improvements to the electronic recording system are ongoing, a combination of electronic and paper recording is in use. This causes duplication, can be burdensome and could result in essential information being overlooked.
- A review of the response of services to domestic abuse has been recently undertaken however the screening and risk assessment of police domestic abuse referrals continues to be an area for development. The volume of these referrals is contributing to the heavy workloads of the childcare duty team manager and staff.
- While the common assessment framework (CAF) is well established across children's services, childcare duty team staff members do not routinely ascertain whether a previous CAF has been completed before proceeding to initial assessment. This could result in information being overlooked or unnecessary duplication for children and families.

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

Yours sincerely

Joan Dennis
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Ada Burns, Chief Executive, Darlington Borough Council
Jenni Cook, Assistant Director/Interim Chair of Darlington Safeguarding Children Board
Councillor Cyndi Hughes, Lead Member for Children's Services, Darlington Borough Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education