

4 June 2010

Mrs Edna Sutton
Director for Children, Young People and Families
Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council
PO Box 609
Barnsley
South Yorkshire
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Dear Mrs Sutton

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Barnsley Metropolitan 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 Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council which was conducted on 5 and 6 May 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 satisfactory practice, with some areas for development.

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

Strengths

- There is a very low turnover of staff, with stable and well experienced assessment teams carrying manageable and carefully monitored caseloads. The service has sufficient capacity to meet the needs of children and young people.
- Managers at all levels are very accessible and provide good quality support to



staff.

- Staff have good access to in-house and external training, and report that it is of a high quality and targeted towards development needs and priority areas of work.
- There was evidence within case files examined of multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA) being used very effectively to ensure that risks were properly identified and shared and that children were appropriately protected.
- Good quality assessments are undertaken with homeless 16 and 17 year olds in line with the Southwark judgement, which ensure that their needs are comprehensively met.
- There has been continuous investment over the past year in performance management systems which now provide clear comparative and timely information for managers. This has contributed to good improvements in the delivery of services.

Satisfactory practice

- There is clear guidance on thresholds for referrals to children's social care services. Child protection concerns are appropriately identified and referred by partner agencies.
- Child protection investigations are conducted in a timely way and steps are taken to ensure that children and young people are protected.
- Management oversight of new contacts and referrals is effective with timely and appropriate decision making.
- Assessments are generally of a good quality. Recent improvements to the electronic recording system have been made to strengthen management oversight about whether children and young people have been seen alone, and to ensure that their contribution is fully detailed.
- Arrangements for the transfer of cases between assessment teams and children in need and family support teams work well.
- There is evidence of rigorous and high quality case file auditing which identify areas for development and action plans. However, there is currently no rolling programme in place for independent case file auditing due to capacity issues within the safeguarding unit.
- Reports to initial child protection conferences are of satisfactory to good quality, and most contain good analysis of risks.
- There is evidence of satisfactory multi-agency involvement within strategy

discussions and a good level of involvement in initial child protection case conferences.

- Staff receive regular supervision and most files have up to date personal development plans.
- Latest data supplied by the council show considerable improvement in the timeliness of initial and core assessments.
- There have been recent improvements in the provision of interpreting and translation services, which staff report to be timely and of good quality.

Areas for development

- While there are examples of detailed and well recorded case discussions, the timely recording in case files of decisions made within supervision is not consistent across the two assessment teams.
- Unqualified staff undertake initial and core assessments within both assessment teams. This does not meet recommendations arising from the Laming Review.
- General Practitioners (GPs) are not routinely contacted for their contribution when assessments are undertaken. This means that not only potentially valuable information for the assessment is not accessed, but in addition GPs are not informed about children's services involvement with the family.
- Ethnicity is not routinely recorded on all case files. Given the recent increase in the number of families from an ethnic minority living in Barnsley, this impacts significantly on the reliability of data used for the planning of services.
- There has been recent delay in convening some initial child protection case conferences due to the unavailability of chairpersons. This has led to delays in child protection plans being put in place.
- Notification of domestic violence incidents by the police is not always timely. This has been recognised and a secure email system is now being put in place to speed up the process. The number of domestic violence referrals is very high and increasing, and capacity to deal with this is limited. Proposals for the joint screening by police and children's social care of domestic violence contacts are currently being evaluated.
- Not all case files have up to date chronologies leading to gaps in the record of children's history and associated agency responses. The council has recently sought to address the problem through making improvements to the electronic recording system.
- Common assessment framework (CAF) assessments are not being used to their full potential and links between the assessment teams and the CAF co-ordinators are not well established. The council has recognised the problem and

has recently increased the numbers of co-ordinators. There is confusion about the use of the CAF form as a referral form and the quality of completed CAFs is variable.

- There is a lack of clarity about joint working arrangements in relation to support for siblings of disabled children. Caseloads within the disabled children's team are high, consequently a higher proportion of assessments are not completed within required timescales compared with other teams. Plans are being developed by the council to address this.

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

Yours sincerely

David Asher
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Phil Coppard, Chief Executive, Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council
Simon Hart, Chair of Barnsley Safeguarding Children Board
Cllr Linda Burgess, Lead Member for Children's Services, Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education