

15 January 2010

Ms Gill Alexander
Strategic Director of Children, Young People and Learning Directorate
North Tyneside Council
Quadrant, The Siverlink North
Cobalt Business Park
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Dear Ms Alexander

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within North Tyneside 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 North Tyneside Council which was conducted on 8 and 9 December 2009. 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:

- The contact, referral and assessment service (First Call) is suitably resourced with committed and motivated staff and has few vacancies.
- Referring agencies, professionals and members of the public are provided with appropriate feedback on the outcome of referrals made.



- Children are always seen on duty visits, their views are sought routinely, and the First Call duty service keeps parents up to date with the progress of the referral through letters and visits.
- Child protection (Section 47) investigations are always undertaken by qualified and suitably experienced social workers and child protection plans seen by inspectors are robust and ensure that children are safeguarded effectively.
- Management oversight of work and decision-making in the First Call service are effective.
- Core assessments are generally satisfactory and support appropriate planning for children.
- Effective multi-agency partnership arrangements are in place, particularly with the police, resulting in strong joint working. Local Safeguarding Children Board training for front line staff from key partner agencies has enabled them to provide robust challenge to decisions made by children's social care with which they do not agree, leading to better safeguarding of children.
- The outsourced out-of-hours service provides clear recording and appropriate actions to safeguard children
- Thresholds for access to services are appropriate and work to embed these arrangements within partner agencies is progressing well.
- Contacts, referrals and assessments for children with disabilities are dealt with appropriately by joint working between the First Call service and the specialist children with disabilities team.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ In cases dealt with by the duty service and seen by the inspectors, children at risk of harm are identified promptly and receive an appropriate response to ensure children's safety. ▪ There is an extensive range of information, procedures and protocols which is helping the continuing development of good practice; for example, a laminated chart showing what to look for at each level of risk for front line staff from key agencies is helping to embed thresholds for access to service. ▪ There has been an increase in the use of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) from 178 children in 2007/8 to 340 in 2008/9, leading to children and families receiving a good range of preventive services without the need for a statutory intervention.

- Senior managers are engaged in regular file audit processes which lead to action plans that help improve front line practice. These are supported by reciprocal arrangements for peer review with a neighbouring council.
- The Local Safeguarding Children Board has just appointed an independent chair, receives regular performance monitoring information about the work of the First Call service, and uses this to challenge and improve the service.
- Accurate, up to date and comprehensive management information is produced regularly and used effectively to assist and improve practice across partner agencies. For example, as a result of performance management activity, the rate of re-referrals within 12 months has been reduced from 30% in the year ending March 2009 to 25.9% at the end of November 2009.
- Social care staff receive regular supervision, including monitoring of caseloads and reflection on the quality of practice. The process identifies developmental needs and opportunities which enable social workers to widen their experience, support the retention of qualified staff and assist family support staff to become qualified social workers.

Areas for development

- New pieces of information on existing contacts are sometimes recorded as new contacts, resulting in an incorrect picture of the level of need of families and the level of possible risk to children.
- The basis for decisions about contacts and referrals is not always clearly recorded.
- The quality of initial assessments is variable, with many showing a lack of appropriate analysis. Records often lack a clear rationale for the decisions made and actions taken, although the level of risk is identified during the assessment process and agreed with the manager.

Yours sincerely



Heather Brown
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Copy: Andrew Kerr, Chief Executive, North Tyneside Council
Barbara Williams, Chair of North Tyneside Safeguarding Children Board
Councillor George Westwater, Lead Member for Children's Services, North Tyneside Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families