

10 January 2012

Mr Gerald Meehan
Halton Borough Council
Municipal Building
Kingsway
Widnes
WA8 7QF

Dear Mr Meehan

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Halton 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 Halton Borough Council which was conducted on 7 and 8 December 2011. The inspection was carried out under section 138 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. It will contribute to next year's annual review of the performance of the authority's children's services, for which Ofsted will award a rating. 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 June 2010 have been addressed in this inspection. Improvement has been made in three areas for development. There remain significant delays in carrying out assessments to timescale in a number of cases seen by inspectors and whilst there is evidence of improvement in the quality of core assessments the quality of initial assessment remains variable therefore this remains an area for development.



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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A very robust and comprehensive system of performance management is effective in involving front line staff in all aspects of audit activity and bringing together senior managers and social workers for regular performance review days. This approach is highly effective in systematically identifying issues, enabling a prompt and coordinated response to ensure continual progress is made in key areas of practice such as the quality of core assessments. ▪ There has been a very high and consistent track record of service improvement, underpinned by a comprehensive range of training and individual support for staff, such as very effective one to one mentoring of social workers by a specialist practice manager to improve their standard of practice to ensure for example that core assessments are sufficiently child focused. ▪ Good partnership work both at a practice and strategic level is resulting in families receiving a comprehensive range of early intervention and lower level support services and further promoting the development of the common assessment framework (CAF). Integrated Working Support Teams are leading to better coordination and intervention at an earlier stage for children and families by providing consultation sessions for professionals as well as direct work with families.
The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Contacts, referrals and CAFs seen by inspectors demonstrate that partner agencies have a clear understanding of thresholds for intervention. The use of the CAF is supported by robust systems of quality assurance which have resulted in improvement in the quality of these assessments. ▪ The introduction of a proforma for the recording of contacts has resulted in an effective contact record which includes details of checks with other agencies, including the police. The recording of contacts seen by inspectors shows improved consideration and analysis of risk factors. This was an area for development at the last inspection. ▪ In all cases seen by inspectors, children at risk of immediate harm were appropriately safeguarded and responded to in accordance with statutory guidance by suitably qualified and experienced social workers. ▪ Strategy meetings are timely and well attended by an appropriate and wide range of professionals. Social care managers liaise effectively with the police with regard to the management of section 47 enquiries, which are thorough and lead to appropriate action to ensure children's safety and protection.

- The quality of core assessments is generally of a high standard with examples seen by inspectors of thorough analysis of risk and protective factors that lead to informed decision making. Children and family members are involved in assessments and the views of family members are taken into account.
- The diverse needs of children, including those with a disability are appropriately addressed in cases seen by inspectors. The communication needs of children are well identified and met in assessment.
- High levels of staff retention results in families receiving a timely and consistent service.
- Staff report that they receive regular supervision and are very well supported by accessible managers. This leads to appropriate decision making on cases.
- Out of hours duty arrangements are well linked to the day service leading to effective communication and sharing of information about cases. Senior managers in the daytime service are readily available for consultation out of hours.
- Learning from serious case reviews is disseminated effectively in order to improve practice. Social workers report that members of the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) have a good understanding of the work of the assessment and duty service, as the chair of the LSCB visits on a regular basis and also holds quarterly meetings with staff.
- Record keeping is up to date and appropriately comprehensive and includes details of when children are seen. A new electronic recording system has recently been introduced to address the duplication of recording and different systems for recording work. This was an area for development at the previous unannounced inspection.

Areas for development

- Although social workers are generally satisfied with the frequency and quality of their supervision, challenge and critical reflection on cases is not always clearly recorded and management oversight of cases is not consistently evidenced on case files.
- The quality of initial assessments is too variable and some lacked sufficiently robust analysis of risk and protective factors and clear recommendations. This was an area for development at the previous unannounced inspection.
- The caseloads of some social workers in the duty and assessment service are too high and this impacts on their ability to complete assessments in a timely manner. In some cases seen by inspectors there were significant delays in carrying out assessments to timescales. The council recognises this problem and is currently consulting staff about plans to change team structures in order to increase capacity in the duty and assessment service. This was an area for

development at the last unannounced inspection.

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

Yours sincerely

Wendy Ghaffar
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: David Parr, Chief Executive, Halton Borough Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education