

8 February 2012

Mrs Margaret Whellans
Group Director of Learning and Children's Services
Gateshead Council
Civic Centre
Regent St
Gateshead
NE8 1HH

Dear Mrs Whellans

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Gateshead 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 Gateshead Council which was conducted on 10 and 11 January 2012. It 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 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 an area of strength and areas of practice that met requirements, with an area for development.

The areas for development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in March 2010 and the inspection of safeguarding and looked after children services in February 2011 have been addressed.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Managers exercise close oversight regarding timely completion of work through supervision and the use of daily management data. They are highly effective in managing risk assessment, prioritisation, case allocation and



caseload management. Managers have achieved significant improvements in these areas since the last inspection. The accuracy of management information and management capacity were areas for development at the last inspection.

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

- Practice and procedures are compliant with statutory requirements.
- The newly configured duty arrangements have improved the efficiency and effectiveness with which referrals are dealt with. All referrals seen during this inspection were responded to promptly and appropriately. This was an area for development at the last inspection.
- Thresholds are implemented appropriately and the quality of decision making regarding children at risk is sound, and evidenced well. As a result children who need a service are receiving appropriate assistance in the cases seen. This was an area for development at the last inspection.
- Strategy meetings and discussions are timely, well recorded and lead to prompt child protection enquiries where this is necessary. This was an area for development at the last inspection.
- Children are routinely seen during assessment processes. Both children's and families' views of their current situation are routinely collected and taken into account in assessments. This was an area for development at the last inspection.
- Inspectors saw good examples of current strengths and unmet needs being explicitly considered through rigorous analysis. Historical information is generally adequately used to inform the analysis of current risk. This was an area for development at the last inspection.
- Children in need and their families promptly receive a variety of appropriate services from a wide range of partner agencies who are well involved in discussions and planning.
- Joint work with the police regarding domestic violence is satisfactory.
- Case records are generally comprehensive and up to date.
- Assessments are generally effective in identifying the needs of children regarding their identity and culture, and the needs of children with a disability are effectively addressed. Considering equality and diversity issues in initial assessments was an area for development at the last inspection.
- Supervision is regular, follows a consistent format, and is valued by staff.

Managers have started to systematically record the reflection and challenge that takes place in supervision. Ensuring that supervision is regular, reflective and challenging was an area for development at the last inspection.

- Staff, including business support staff, have high morale, feel valued, appreciate the accessibility of managers, and are encouraged and supported to attend relevant training.
- Out-of-hours services effectively and promptly share information with the daytime services, leading to satisfactory management of risk.
- The views of service users are actively sought and the council has been successful in gaining a high number of service users' views about key elements of their experience of the service. The council is beginning to use this information to shape service delivery and development in the referral and assessment team.
- The take up of the common assessment framework is improving and a number of agencies are making good use of it to involve children and families in focused assessments and timely interventions.

Area for development

- Child in need and child protection plans are generally effective in reducing the risk of harm to children and young people. However, some are not sufficiently explicit regarding the desired outcome of the plan, and do not always include contingency arrangements or family views of assessment conclusions.

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

Yours sincerely

**Dick O'Brien,
Her Majesty's Inspector**

Copy: Roger Kelly, Chief Executive, Gateshead Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education