

16 November 2011

Mr Keith Moore
Executive Director of Children's Services
Sunderland City Council
Sandhill Centre
Grindon Lane
Sunderland
Tyne and Wear
SR3 4EN

Dear Mr Moore

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Sunderland City 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 Sunderland City Council which was conducted on 18 and 19 October 2011. 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.

Three of the four areas for development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in June 2010 have been addressed. However, while some improvements have been made to the integrated children's system, 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">▪ The council demonstrates a strong commitment to safeguarding and has made



a significant investment to strengthen the workforce. Additional social workers have been appointed in response to increasing demand for services, and funding has been secured to recruit five peripatetic social workers to provide cover for maternity leave, sickness and staff training. An effective overseas recruitment campaign has resulted in the appointment of ten experienced social workers during the past year. Investment in a comprehensive support programme for newly qualified social workers has contributed to the high staff retention rate.

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

- Section 47 enquiries are timely, risks are effectively identified, and decisions are appropriate.
- Staff report that workloads are manageable. Referrals are responded to promptly and all assessments are allocated to qualified social workers. Timely transfer to longer term teams enables children's plans to progress promptly.
- All referrals from the police are jointly considered and prioritised, and effective action is taken in cases that require further evaluation. This was an area for development at the last inspection.
- In the majority of cases seen record keeping is up to date and management decisions are clearly recorded.
- Staff demonstrate appropriate awareness of the diverse needs of children and families. Good examples were seen of social workers adapting their approach in order to help parents understand the concerns about their children's welfare.
- Managers are readily available to staff and their support is valued. Supervision is regular and training needs are appropriately identified. Case discussion and decisions are clearly recorded on case files.
- Staff are suitably qualified and benefit from a good range of training opportunities. The lessons from serious case reviews are shared with staff, and have contributed to improving practice.
- The out-of-hours service is staffed by qualified and experienced daytime social workers on a rota; these arrangements are well established and effective.
- Follow up surveys are conducted with parents in relation to their experiences of assessments and their views are fed back to staff to improve service delivery.
- A range of audit activity is beginning to have an impact on the quality of practice. This was an area for development at the last inspection.

- Senior managers have a good understanding of the strengths and areas for development in the service and are taking responsive action to make the required improvements.

Areas for development

- The council's integrated children's system (ICS) does not support efficient practice. This was an area for development at the previous inspection. Some progress has been made in the presentation of forms such as children in need plans. However, recording case information on ICS is still too time-consuming. For example, while initial assessments are undertaken and the outcomes are agreed by managers within the required timescale, there is often delay before the written assessment is input to the ICS. As a result, full information is not available to families or those professionals who may need it.
- The quality of assessments is inconsistent. While children are routinely seen and seen alone, their views are not always clearly recorded and it is not evident how these are taken into account in planning. The quality of analysis is too variable. The council has made this a priority in its service improvement plan.
- The threshold for referral to the children's social care service is not widely understood by partner agencies. A high number of initial assessments result in no further action or in a decision to use the common assessment framework. These cases could be more appropriately screened leading to a higher take up by early intervention services rather than being referred to social care.
- Although telephone strategy discussions are held with the police as a matter of course, strategy meetings are not routinely held on a multi-agency basis. The council is working with partners to improve this position.

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

Yours sincerely

Robert Hackeson
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Dr Dave Smith, Chief Executive, Sunderland City Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education

