

Freshford House
Redcliffe Way
Bristol BS1 6NL

T 08456 40 40 40
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 0117 9456333
Direct F 0117 9456554
Safeguarding.lookedafterchildren@ofsted.gov.uk



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Ms Helen Watson
Executive Director for Children and Young People
South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council
Town Hall and Civic Offices
Westoe Road
South Shields
Tyne and Wear
NE33 2RL

Dear Ms Watson

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council 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 South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council which was conducted on 5 and 6 January 2010. 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:

- There is clear evidence from practice that risk of harm is managed effectively so that children at risk of or suffering significant harm are identified and receive a prompt and effective response.



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- Management oversight of referral and assessment services is effective, including in relation to those cases where no further action is planned. All decisions are made in accordance with statutory timescales.
- Social workers obtain an holistic picture of children and families by making use of paper files, which are used alongside the electronic Integrated Children's System (ICS). This assists with the production of complicated reports, such as witness statements for the court, allowing information to be more easily retrieved and collated.
- Timescales for assessments are improving, despite an increasing volume of work, and are generally in line with or better than those of statistical neighbours.
- Thresholds for access to children's social care services are well understood and operate effectively across partner agencies. This enables children to be referred appropriately and receive a service.
- Administrative staff, customer service staff, social work assistants and social workers work well together to support appropriate information gathering and analysis of information to inform assessment decisions.
- All children and young people who require an allocated social worker have one. Clear processes are in place to ensure that cases are well monitored during transfer processes.
- Appropriate consideration of equality and diversity issues is evident in most core assessments. For example, the assessment of an asylum seeking child from a South East Asian country for a private fostering arrangement was undertaken in an informed, sensitive and thorough way taking account of all relevant factors.
- The use of the common assessment framework (CAF) is increasing through the close links between the CAF co-ordinator, the duty team and the care planning teams; this is helping some families to receive appropriate services outside of a statutory framework.
- Systems for auditing case files are satisfactory and management oversight is effective in identifying any delays or difficulties in progressing cases.
- The work of the referral and assessment team is monitored and audited through the Local Safeguarding Children Board performance management group. For example, the group examined and commented on the annual return of child protection statistics to the government and this prompted a re-examination of systems by the referral and assessment service managers.
- Children and young people are always seen as part of assessments; their views are elicited and are taken into account in planning a service intervention for them.

- Programmes involving statutory and voluntary agencies to tackle the high level of domestic violence in the area are working well to support victims and work with perpetrators, lessening the risks to children in their homes.

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

Strengths

- Core assessments and initial children protection conference reports are of good quality and well structured with clear analysis leading to appropriate plans for children and young people.
- A system is in place to seek feedback from families who have received a service from the referral and assessment team and action is taken to improve the services in response to this feedback.
- Good workforce planning supported by a well developed culture of teamwork and management support ensures that the referral and assessment service is delivered by a stable, committed and enthusiastic workforce. Staff work effectively to offer a good service to vulnerable children. The small numbers of vacancies are covered by experienced agency social workers.
- Staff report good informal and formal supervision and support; there has been clear progress in improving the quality of supervision and supervision files since the Joint Area Review and this is monitored through an audit process.
- All staff have good access to training and development opportunities to enable them to offer a high quality service for children and families. The council operates an effective scheme to train unqualified staff as social workers and is part of the government's pilot scheme for newly qualified social workers.
- There is ample evidence of good partnership working across all key agencies in the borough, facilitating an holistic service to safeguard children; in particular, there is very good joint working with the local police helping to keep children, vulnerable adults and staff safe.
- The current referral and assessment service management team is strong and provides clear management and leadership which are delivering improvements in the service.
- The out of hours service, based alongside the referral and assessment team, is good with a very experienced staff group providing effective intervention based on local knowledge and local networks; liaison with daytime teams is very good.

Areas for development

- The quality of initial assessments is inconsistent with some lacking a clear focus and rigorous analysis; such assessments do not always clearly identify family strengths and vulnerabilities and use that information to formulate a recommendation for action and a plan. Although identified, there is insufficient attention given to equality and diversity issues.
- Although children and young people are seen as part of their assessment, some case records lacked evidence that children had been seen alone in circumstances where this would have been appropriate.
- The ICS system is seen by many staff as cumbersome, time consuming and sometimes not able to produce the recording that is required. This is particularly the case in respect of assessments undertaken as part of a child protection investigation and in showing clear evidence that actions have been agreed by managers.
- Due to the volume of work, the recording of some children in need cases is not completed and closed in a timely manner.

Yours sincerely

Jenny Gwilt
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Martin Swales, Chief Executive, South Tyneside MBC
Barbara Williams, Independent Chair of South Tyneside Safeguarding Children Board
Councillor Jim Foreman, Lead Member for Children's Services, South Tyneside MBC
Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families