

15 January 2010

Ms Gill Rollings
Director of Children, Families and Learning
Middlesbrough Borough Council
PO Box 69
Vancouver House
Middlesbrough
TE1 1EL

Dear Ms Rollings

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Middlesbrough 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 Middlesbrough 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 and paper case records; supervision files and notes; observation of managers and 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. 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:

- Clear multi-agency thresholds for assessment are in place. Children in need of safeguarding, including those affected by domestic abuse are identified and referred in a timely way by local agencies.
- Initial decision making in respect of contacts and referrals is timely and satisfactory. Prompt action is taken to ensure that the risk of harm is

PROTECT: INSPECTION



clearly identified. Referrers are kept informed of the action taken and are effectively consulted during assessments.

- All initial and core assessments reviewed by inspectors were completed by qualified social workers and were of a satisfactory standard overall.
- Children and young people are suitably involved in assessments and their views are taken into account when making plans to meet their needs.
- The racial, cultural, religious and linguistic needs of children and young people are appropriately assessed.
- Child protection enquiries examined by inspectors were carried out promptly by suitably experienced and trained workers. Risk is assessed in accordance with statutory guidance. Where children require protection, swift action is taken to hold initial child protection conferences.
- Information is shared effectively within child protection strategy meetings which are well attended by all relevant agencies.
- Staff receive planned and regular formal supervision with a clear focus on case management and professional development. The recording of supervision is satisfactory.
- Managers have taken appropriate action to strengthen the capacity of the enquiry and assessment service to respond to the recent significant increase in referrals.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Staff show a high level of commitment to safeguarding vulnerable children and work hard to achieve this through well focused identification and responses to risks of harm. Front line staff and managers value the support offered by senior officers. ▪ A wide range of accessible and good quality training is available to staff who report that training is effective in improving their practice.
Areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) is used insufficiently by agencies to meet children and young people's needs at an early stage and to avoid potential referrals to children's social care. ▪ Where core assessments are completed as part of child protection investigations they are recorded as having started at the point that a child

protection plan is agreed. This arrangement is not in accordance with statutory guidance. However, the assessments examined by inspectors were completed promptly and thoroughly. The council has recently taken appropriate steps to ensure compliance with the national guidance on recording but this has not yet had sufficient impact.

- The electronic integrated children's system (ICS) is at an early stage of implementation. The current combination of paper and electronic recording leads to some inefficiencies and presents challenges to the effective sharing of information between teams. Senior managers recognise the need to accelerate the progress of implementation of the ICS but a comprehensive plan is not in place.
- Delays in recording the outcomes of assessments and strategy meetings contribute to further delays in completing transfer summaries. This is compounded by a backlog of records requiring typing and uploading to the electronic system.
- Team managers have access to regular performance information on the work of their teams. However, this is under-used and does not support systematic monitoring of the progress of assessments.
- Although a robust process has been recently introduced for management audits of the quality of practice, it has not yet been fully extended to the contact, referral and assessment service.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Heather Brown", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Heather Brown
Divisional Manager, Social Care Safeguarding

Copy: Ian Parker, Chief Executive, Middlesbrough Council
Barbara Shaw, Chair of South Tees Safeguarding Children Board
Mike Carr, Lead Member for Children's Services
Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families