

5 February 2010

Mr Murray Rose
Director of Children's Services
Darlington Borough Council
Feethams, Darlington
County Durham
DL1 5QT

Dear Mr Rose

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Darlington 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 Darlington Borough Council which was conducted on 12 and 13 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:

- Effective action is taken to ensure that children and young people identified as being at risk of immediate harm are safeguarded.
- The Children and Families Duty team is staffed by suitably qualified and experienced workers with a good knowledge of the local community and services.



- Committed and enthusiastic staff report that they have access to relevant training and regular supervision and support. Managers are also readily available for consultation on a daily basis.
- Social workers engage well with families and demonstrate an appropriate understanding of legislation and guidance.
- Children and young people are routinely seen and interviewed and work undertaken is suitably child centred.
- Ethnic, cultural and language issues are properly considered and a thorough, sensitive approach to meeting the needs of children from different ethnic backgrounds is evident.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Good collaborative work between the Children and Families Duty team and other agencies is evident throughout all contact, referral and assessment work. ▪ Child protection assessments are thorough, involve the children, young people and their parents, are of good quality and focus on improving outcomes. ▪ Strategy meetings to plan child protection investigations are recorded well with clear decisions. The process of having follow-up meetings to review progress and plan further action is good and ensures effective multi-agency working. ▪ The common assessment framework is well established with good multi-agency involvement. A recent survey, carried out by Durham University, found a high satisfaction rate among service users and professionals of the process, and on the improvements in outcomes for children and young people. ▪ Out of hours social work practice is good and timely, with excellent recording of the work undertaken.
Areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Social workers have high caseloads and the pressures of work result in delays in completing assessments and in recording the work undertaken. Senior managers are aware of these issues and have recently increased social worker and management capacity in Children's Services. It is too early to see the impact of these actions. ▪ The practice of when to carry out an initial assessment does not meet national guidance. Visits are undertaken to families in many cases prior to a decision being made on whether to carry out an initial assessment, leading in effect to

an assessment of whether an assessment is necessary. Agency checks are not always conducted where parents have declined their permission in child in need cases. Although children are seen and social work assessment is undertaken, decisions in some cases are made on whether to offer services without the benefit of a full multi-agency assessment.

- The response to domestic abuse referrals is inconsistent, with some families being offered assistance while others, in similar situations, are not. However, children identified as potentially at risk are always visited. The local authority and partner agencies are aware of these issues and are currently undertaking a review of practice.
- The computer recording system is burdensome, resulting in too much time being spent by social workers completing forms. Recording generally does not reflect the apparent good practice. Staff and managers have a good knowledge of cases but, from the records kept, it is unclear whether due weight is given to previous referrals and presenting issues. Similarly, it is not always clear how decisions have been made and the extent of the oversight given by managers.

Yours sincerely

Neil Penswick
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Ada Burns, Chief Executive, Darlington Borough Council
Jenni Cooke, Assistant Director/Chair of Darlington Safeguarding Children Board
Councillor Cyndi Hughes, Lead Member for Children's Services, Darlington Borough Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families