

4 June 2010

Mr Gerald Meehan
Strategic Director for Children and Young People
Halton Borough Council
Municipal Building
Kingsway
Widnes
WA8 7QF

Dear Mr Meehan

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Halton Borough 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 Halton Borough Council which was conducted on 5 and 6 May 2010. 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 and other practitioners.

The inspection identified areas of strength, satisfactory practice and areas for development.

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

Strengths

- All workers and managers spoken to have good morale and were enthusiastic and dedicated to improving outcomes for children in Halton.
- There are good arrangements for workforce development including a staff recruitment scheme which results in low use of agency staff. Newly qualified social workers are well supported through an induction programme, protected



caseloads and focused supervision with their managers.

- Social workers have effective and regular supervision. Inspectors saw examples of excellent management practice which was appropriately focused on progressing cases and on the development needs of the workers.
- Social workers report that they have good access to a range of training in safeguarding and child protection and also excellent opportunities for professional progression.
- There is a good programme of quality assurance audits led by and reported to the Halton Safeguarding Children Board. The learning from these audits has been developed into multi-agency action plans which have resulted in improvements in practice.

Satisfactory practice

- All cases are allocated and dealt with by appropriately qualified and experienced workers.
- Duty and assessment team managers are visible and supportive, and provide effective guidance on case management.
- Child protection investigations in accordance with Section 47 Children Act 1989 are timely and are appropriately triggered where initial assessments reveal the need for more in-depth enquiries.
- Initial and core assessments include the contribution of other agencies and professionals and are appropriately signed off by managers who specify actions to be followed. Copies of assessments are routinely shared with families.
- Children are seen alone when appropriate and their wishes and feelings are suitably recorded and acted upon.
- In most cases written feedback using a locally developed consultation form is provided to agencies in contact with the childcare teams. This ensures a shared understanding and clarity about work to be undertaken across agencies.
- The common assessment framework is increasingly being used by all agencies. Arrangements have been strengthened through the appointment of locality workers to support colleagues undertaking this work.
- In all of the cases seen by inspectors there was clear recognition of the ethnicity and diversity needs of families.

Areas for development

- In many cases seen by inspectors, there were significant delays in carrying out assessments to timescales. The recording of assessments and the analysis undertaken is not of a consistent quality.
- In a small number of cases seen by inspectors, the social care service had investigated safeguarding concerns but there was no clear record of contact being made with the police.
- There are a number of systems for recording work conducted by social workers which result in duplication, delays and frustrations for daytime staff, the emergency duty team and managers. The local authority is aware of the issue and a new purpose-built information system is about to be introduced.
- The service does not manage the assessment and recording of potential risk of harm effectively at the point of first contact. Although satisfactory work was seen by inspectors in one office, in another office five out of nine contacts had been closed with no recording of an assessment of risk. These cases have been brought to the attention of the local authority and a robust action plan is being introduced to ensure there is consistent practice across the borough.

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

Yours sincerely

Neil Penswick
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: David Parr, Chief Executive, Halton Borough Council
Audrey Williamson, Chair of Halton Safeguarding Children Board
Cllr John Swain, Lead Member for Children's Services, Halton Borough Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education