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Ms Heather Thwaites
Interim Director of Children's Services
Wokingham Borough Council
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Shute End
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Dear Ms Thwaites

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Wokingham 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 Wokingham Borough Council which was conducted on 2 and 3 September 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, for which Ofsted will award a rating later in the year.

The inspection identified two areas for priority action and a number of 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:

- The very recently established referral and assessment team is managing the risk of harm to children referred to the service appropriately.
- Child protection practice and procedures are compliant with statutory requirements. In particular, recent child protection strategy meetings are timely and robust.



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- Child protection enquiries are timely and are carried out by suitably experienced social workers.
- Communication and inter-agency working between statutory partners are effective and well established.
- Support and training including that provided to those who are newly qualified, are highly regarded by frontline staff.
- There is recent evidence of improvements in the timeliness of initial and core assessments which is now satisfactory.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Capacity in frontline services has been strengthened through the provision of substantial additional resources. In particular a new electronic recording and performance management system has been commissioned and social care management capacity has been improved. ▪ Frontline caseloads are low and are supporting recent improvements in assessments and service delivery.
Areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Some assessments are not sufficiently analytical and do not have clear service recommendations and specific and measurable action plans. However, there are some examples of initial and core assessments which are of satisfactory or better quality. ▪ Some initial assessments are signed off prematurely by managers in order to meet timescales. In addition, individual assessments are not consistently completed for each child within sibling groups. ▪ Thresholds for assessment and services for children in need are not consistently applied. ▪ Case recording is not consistently up to date and does not always report the activity which has taken place. Case records do not consistently demonstrate casework supervision and direction. ▪ The views of children and their families are not consistently taken into account in assessments or service delivery. ▪ The identity, ethnicity, religion and cultural needs of children and their families are not always appropriately considered in assessment and planning. ▪ The current electronic recording system is outdated and does not store information securely. There is insufficient live access to the system for the

out of hours social work service. The council recognises this and plans to implement a new electronic recording system later this year.

- Performance monitoring arrangements of case work practice have only recently been established and are at a basic stage. Further development relies upon the implementation of the new electronic recording system later this year.
- There are limited numbers of experienced permanent social workers and managers and a continuing over-reliance upon agency staff.

This visit has identified the following area(s) for priority action.

Area(s) for priority action

- Arrangements for the internal quality assurance of case work practice are not established. Therefore the council does not have a sufficient overview of frontline practice and managers are not able effectively to monitor the quality of the service that is delivered to children and their families.
- Previously poor assessment of child protection risk has led, in some instances, to premature case closure. The potential safeguarding concerns about these cases have yet to be addressed.

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

Yours sincerely



Heather Brown
Divisional Manager, Social Care Safeguarding

Copy: Ms Susan Law, Chief Executive, Wokingham Borough Council
Mr Stephen Barber, Chair of Wokingham Safeguarding Children Board
Mr Rob Stanton, Lead Member for Children's Services, Wokingham Borough Council
Mr Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families