

18 August 2010

Mr Howard Cooper  
Director of Children's Services  
Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council  
Hamilton Buildings  
Conway Street  
Birkenhead  
CH41 4FD

Dear Mr Cooper

**Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Wirral Metropolitan 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 Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council which was conducted on 20 and 21 July 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, other practitioners and administrative staff.

The inspection identified areas of strength and satisfactory practice, with some areas for development. During the inspection 60 children's files, one private fostering file and nine staff supervision files were seen.

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

| <b>Strengths</b>   |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ The Remodelling Project, based on in-depth research of the service by Lancaster University, has resulted in significant additional investment in front line services and better use of resources to underpin the development of preventative work.</li></ul> |



- The 11 integrated multi-agency area teams are working very well to provide support in local communities to families whose children have additional needs through the effective implementation of the common assessment framework and the team around the child.
- The multi-agency Family Safety Unit provides a very good service to families affected by domestic violence by supporting victims; additionally, services are commissioned which offer children therapeutic programmes.
- The extensive and varied programme of performance management activity, including multi-agency audits of contact, referral and assessment work, is very effective. Senior managers use this information well to improve individual practice, challenge casework decisions and identify themes for service development.
- Qualified social workers from district assessment teams, including those from the children with disabilities team, staff the central advice and duty team (CADT) on a rota basis. This is good practice which provides social workers with regular experience of the range of work at the front door of the service and ensures that staff maintain up-to-date knowledge.
- Weekly meetings of all front line managers to review and monitor the operation of thresholds, decision making and learning and practice development are highly effective in ensuring that all children and families receive a consistent and appropriate level of service.

### **Satisfactory practice**

- Children at risk of or suffering significant harm are identified promptly and dealt with appropriately. Child protection investigations are comprehensive, timely and always carried out by qualified social workers.
- Initial and core assessments are carried out by suitably qualified and experienced social workers. The quality of assessments is at least adequate and often good, demonstrating clear analysis of risk, protective factors and action plans.
- The practice of keeping both paper and electronic files is time-consuming. However, records do demonstrate effective management oversight and are mostly up-to-date.
- There is a clear management structure and good management oversight of front line staff who are well supported and have manageable caseloads. There are good training opportunities and newly qualified social workers have protected caseloads.
- There is clear guidance from the Local Safeguarding Children Board on integrated working across the partnership. The purpose and use of the common assessment framework (CAF) are well understood and established, especially in

secondary schools. CAF quality is audited on a regular basis and where the standard expected is not met remedial work occurs promptly.

- Initial and repeat contacts are managed appropriately. Management oversight and decision making about when to complete an initial or core assessment are timely and well considered.
- Performance indicators relating to contact, referral and assessment work, including timeliness of assessments, are generally satisfactory in comparison with statistical neighbours.
- All children subject to child protection plans have an allocated qualified social worker and there is no unallocated work in the contact, referral and assessment service.
- Children are seen alone during assessments where appropriate and there is good evidence that their views inform children in need and child protection plans.
- Appropriate consideration is given to equality and diversity issues in all casework. Consideration of diversity issues and demographic trends is also evident in service development plans.
- Practice procedures are clear, accessible and staff are aware of what is required of them.
- Satisfactory action has been taken in relation to the areas of development outlined in the 2008 private fostering inspection.
- Staff are aware of the lessons learned from a recent serious case review.

#### **Areas for development**

- Supervision is routinely undertaken, however the quality of staff supervision files is inconsistent with little recorded evidence of reflective supervision or consideration of personal development issues. Annual appraisals do not take place and as a result consideration is not given to how individual learning needs contribute to an overall training plan.
- The CADT provides a consultation service for professionals and other callers and the recording of these consultations is separate from the integrated children's system (ICS). In some cases this arrangement prevents the analysis and co-ordination of repeat concerns about children and families as consultations do not currently progress to being recorded as contacts and are filed on a separate database.
- While managers in district assessment teams and the children with disabilities team authorise assessments, they do not always record the rationale for

management decisions in the assessment document on ICS.

- The process for transfer of cases from district assessment teams to care management teams is not yet consistently established and this impacts on the capacity of district assessment teams to carry out timely assessments.

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

Yours sincerely

**Jenny Gwilt**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

Copy: Stephen Maddox, Chief Executive, Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council  
Dennis Charlton, Chair of Wirral Safeguarding Children Board  
Councillor Mrs Sheila Clarke MBE, Lead Member for Children's Services, Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council  
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education