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1 March 2012

Mr David Armstrong
Interim Director of Children's Services
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Children and Young People's Department
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Dear Mr Armstrong

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 1 and 2 February 2012. The inspection was carried out under section 138 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. It will contribute to next year's annual review of the performance of the authority's children's services, for which Ofsted will award a rating. I am grateful to you and your staff for the help and time given during 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 areas of practice that met requirements, with some areas for development. During the inspection 63 files and 10 staff supervision files were seen.

The areas of development identified at the previous contact, referral and assessment arrangements in July 2010 and the Safeguarding and Looked After Children Inspection in January and February 2011 have been subject to a robust action plan to deliver improvements. Marked progress has been made in the majority of areas although there remains work to be done around the current electronic recording arrangements and the need to ensure that all records of assessments, plans and

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review reflect the cultural and identity needs of children and their families. Also the quality and frequency of supervision remains variable.

Strengths

- The central advice and duty team is very well managed and provides for the effective screening of all contacts. The working practices ensure that staff are clear about their respective roles and responsibility and the management and quality assurance arrangements are rigorous. This provides for informed decision making, timely response to all contacts and referrers are routinely informed of outcomes. All cases seen were signed off by the practice manager and the rationale for decision making clear leading to good planning. The work of the central advice and duty team is subject to weekly scrutiny by senior managers and this helps support the early identification of vulnerable families and children potentially at risk. The recording of consultations was an area for development in the unannounced inspection in 2010.
- The council has in place clear thresholds which are understood and consistently applied by partner agencies and this ensures the early identification and management of children at risk. The continuum of need process ensures there are clear arrangements in place for access to services which is supported by the effective use of the common assessment framework across a range of agencies and demonstrates sustained and continued improvement in reaching families. Partners are fully engaged with supporting vulnerable families without recourse to statutory intervention and this provides for the effective targeting of resources.

The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas

- In the majority of cases section 47 enquiries were undertaken in accordance with statutory requirements.
- Children assessed at risk receive a timely and appropriate response and most subject of child protection plans are supported by effective actions and partnership working. However some plans are not sufficiently clear of what action needs to be taken by parents or specify the consequences if outcomes agreed are not achieved.
- Strategy meetings overall are timely and evidenced good joint working practice, in particular with the police in the management of domestic violence issues where children are potentially at risk.
- All initial and core assessments are undertaken by suitably qualified social workers. Multi disciplinary working is good and evident in child protection cases and assessment and social workers routinely liaise with key partners.
- Overall completed assessments were satisfactory, some were very good identifying both risk and protective factors and underpinned by good risk

analysis. Some initial assessments that progressed to core assessments were incomplete and the rationale for decision making not always clear. This potentially weakened the development of effective plans and services.

- Overall case records are up to date and inspectors found good evidence of management oversight reflected in signed and dated records. However, the use of chronologies is not routinely evidenced but the council is working towards strengthening its practice in this area.
- Most assessments included the views and wishes of children and parents and influence the planning and delivery of services. In particular the assessments completed within the disability service reflected good practice in relation to timeliness, social inclusion issues and in capturing the views of children with a disability and the impact on parents in meeting their children's needs.
- Children are seen and most seen alone where appropriate. Staff report that no assessment will be signed off by their manager until the worker has evidence children have been seen. This is supported by inspection findings.
- The out of hours provision is effective and cases seen reflect good links with daytime services which provides for the prompt response to referrals made. The team benefits from an experienced manager and stable workforce. Work undertaken to promote joint working is good and includes regular meetings with managers across services and agencies. All activity is reviewed daily and signed off by the duty manager. A review of the service undertaken last year highlighted positive feedback from partners.
- Transfer arrangements from the district assessment teams to care management teams are in place with clear protocols in place to support transition. This was an area for development in the unannounced inspection in 2010.
- Most social workers spoken to report feeling supported and listened to by managers and value both the formal and informal access made available to them to discuss issues. The council benefits from a stable and experienced workforce.
- Training is good which includes a comprehensive programme for newly qualified social workers (NQSW). Lessons learned from serious case reviews from both local and national findings are regularly disseminated to staff via briefing sessions, some of which are mandatory for all staff. However some staff report that the competing demands of their work can impact on the opportunity to attend training available.
- The quality of decision making and interventions is good overall with clear line management and organisational accountability evident.

Areas for development

- Most cases make reference to equality and diversity issues, and inspectors found some good examples of social inclusion issues in assessments. Ethnicity and cultural needs are not routinely recorded and given full consideration in assessments, plans and reviews. While the local authority has made progress in addressing this area of practice, this is not yet fully embedded. This was an area for development in the safeguarding and looked after children inspection in 2011.
- The council's performance information highlights the decline in the timeliness of both initial and core assessments and inspectors found a number of cases where this resulted in delay in completing work. The council are aware of this and have effective systems in place to regularly review performance at senior management level and measures recently taken have resulted in increased management capacity within one area team particularly affected by the increase in referrals to help improve performance.
- Of the supervision records seen by inspectors there were significant gaps in the frequency it was held. In one area office some staff reported being under significant pressure and it was not always evident on the supervision records what action had been taken to address this. Supervision files seen were generally of variable quality and most did not include annual appraisals.
- While most staff report having manageable workloads which are regularly reviewed by their managers some NQSW have very high caseloads and hold complex work including child protection cases. While managers have increased the level of supervisory support to NQSW the work load is not always commensurate with their level of experience.
- The council has in place a robust action plan to address the deficiencies of the current integrated children's system as highlighted at recent inspections. Since the last inspection the council has implemented a revised template for recording assessments and this has resulted in user friendly assessment documents. However, managers and staff report the system remains cumbersome and not all templates are user friendly. This was an area for development in the last inspection 2011.

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

Yours sincerely

Mary Candlin
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Jim Wilkie, Chief Executive, Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education