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Ms Sharon Menghini  
Children and Young People's Services  
Stoke-on-Trent City Council  
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Dear Ms Menghini

**Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Stoke-on-Trent City 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 Stoke-on-Trent City Council which was conducted on 8 and 9 March 2011. 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 practice that met requirements, with some areas for development.

The areas of development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in June 2010 have been addressed. An action plan has been developed by the council. The majority of areas for development have been fully addressed, one area remains as an area for development.



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

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

- Prompt action is taken in response to contacts and referrals. Children and young people in cases seen by inspectors had been appropriately safeguarded.
- Case records are largely thorough and up-to-date and updated policies and procedures are in place to guide and support practice.
- Social workers and social work assistants are committed to promoting good outcomes for children. They value the accessibility of practice and principal managers, and confirm that they receive regular and helpful case supervision. As a result they feel well supported in managing their work.
- Social workers are not expected to work beyond their skills or capacity and report good access to a wide range of training to support their practice. Newly qualified social workers are offered a package of structured support to enable them to develop the skills and expertise to manage the full range of tasks during a suitable period of induction.
- Managers exercise regular oversight of the work which includes undertaking routine case file audits. They are supported in their management role by a good range of regular performance management reports and regular performance meetings.
- Use of the common assessment framework (CAF) is increasing, with a range of agencies taking on the lead professional role. Local evaluation of the impact of CAF indicates that this is beginning to appropriately identify and meet children's needs at an earlier stage.
- Initial and core assessments seen are of satisfactory quality. Children are seen and their views taken into account. Parents' and carers' views are evidenced in assessments and completed assessments are routinely shared with families. While the quality of risk assessment and analysis within assessments is variable, a range of measures is in place to improve assessment quality such as additional training and quality audits. Social workers are expected to make use of the strengths and difficulties and adult well-being questionnaires in completing core assessments.
- Staff members are aware of, and sensitive to, aspects of equality and diversity such as culture, religion, disability or sexuality. This is evidenced in case records and assessments and some thorough assessment of the needs of children with disabilities was seen by inspectors.
- Police domestic violence referrals are now being received in a timely fashion and considerable work has been undertaken to raise awareness of the risks to children from domestic abuse resulting in more appropriate referrals. Plans to

further improve the risk assessment and prioritisation of these referrals on a joint agency basis are being actively developed and expected to be in place over the next few months.

- Section 47 enquiries are timely and carried out appropriately. Strategy discussions are now taking place at the relevant time and are securing a planned joint agency approach in order to promote better outcomes for children.
- The emergency duty team (EDT) works effectively with daytime services to manage risk of harm to children and there is good communication between the daytime and out-of-hours services.

#### **Areas for development**

- A recent increase in referral levels has resulted in a number of unallocated initial assessments within the last few weeks. Managers exercise regular oversight of these although there is no explicit and agreed system for the risk assessment and prioritisation of this work.
- The previous history of social care involvement with families is not fully or clearly taken into account in all re-referrals and assessments and this remains an area for development.
- There can be delays in obtaining interpretation services where these are necessary to communicate with a family or child. This contributes to delays in completing assessments and can mean that, where prompt and immediate action is necessary to protect children, this has to be undertaken without the benefit of an interpreter.
- The current system of keeping full paper files in addition to electronic records is duplicative and results in extra unnecessary work for staff.
- There is currently some overlap between the roles of telephone call takers and the duty social workers which means that callers may have to repeat information and again can result in duplication of work.

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

Yours sincerely

**Joan Dennis**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

Copy: John van de Laarschot, Chief Executive, Stoke-on-Trent City Council  
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education