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Ms Kath O' Dwyer
Executive Director of Children's Services
Warrington Borough Council
2nd Floor, New Town House
Buttermarket Street
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Dear Ms O' Dwyer

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Warrington 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 Warrington Borough Council which was conducted on 9 and 10 November 2011. 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 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 practice managers 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.

The areas for development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in June 2009, and the areas for improvement relevant to this front line service identified in the safeguarding and looked after children inspection in October 2009 and the re-inspection of safeguarding services in January 2011 have all been addressed.

The areas for priority action identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in June 2009 have all been addressed.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The council has taken robust action since the last unannounced inspection and the safeguarding and looked after children inspection in 2009 to address the identified priority areas for action and areas for development. Following a rigorous review of performance and service provision, considerable additional resources have been committed to front line services to build capacity. Staff at all levels are actively implementing the service improvement plan which is being effectively overseen. Progress has been rapid and child protection services have been strengthened. ▪ The timeliness of initial and core assessments was an area for priority action at the unannounced inspection. Performance on timescales for assessments has improved significantly and is now very good when compared with similar councils.
The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The council's strategy for the recruitment and retention of staff has resulted in a suitably qualified and experienced workforce. Social work caseloads are manageable. Referrals that go on to an assessment are appropriately allocated to qualified social workers. ▪ The programme of support for newly qualified social workers includes protected caseloads and opportunities for critical reflection and is highly valued. ▪ The quality of referral information provided by agencies has improved and ensures social workers are equipped with the information they need to make decisions. ▪ Contacts are dealt with promptly by customer service officers and decisions are made by qualified social workers. The roles and responsibilities of unqualified and qualified staff are clearly defined. ▪ Child protection investigations are undertaken by suitably qualified and experienced social workers. Action needed to ensure the immediate safety of children and young people is identified and implemented promptly. ▪ Section 47 strategy discussions and investigations are held promptly with clear decisions and actions recorded. ▪ Extensive work has been undertaken to complete a backlog of core assessments to ensure all children who need an assessment receive one. ▪ Records demonstrate sensitivity to the diverse needs of children. Case

decisions are clearly recorded by managers and further actions required are identified and recorded in a timely manner. Children are routinely seen and seen alone.

- Assessments, child protection conference minutes, core group meeting notes and professional consultation case records highlight effective multi-agency partnership working. Inspectors saw some good examples of work completed as part of the common assessment framework.
- The emergency duty arrangements are effective and ensure continuity of provision between the out-of-hours service and the duty assessment team.
- Social workers who spoke with inspectors report ready access to good quality training that is relevant to their professional development needs.
- Effective systems are in place for the collation of performance data and case file audits. These are being used by managers to make decisions about service strengths and weakness leading to improvements in key areas of service operation.

Areas for development

- The analysis of risk in initial and core assessments does not always fully encompass a thorough evaluation of parents' capacity to care for their children. Records seen do not always take account of the views of children.
- It is not always recorded whether parents have received a copy of the child protection conference or core group meeting minutes.
- There has been rapid improvement in the frequency of social work supervision to ensure social work tasks are closely monitored and cases are progressed effectively. However, it is not always clear from supervision records whether sufficient time is given for reflective practice and professional development linked to the individual objectives set out in social workers' personal development plans.

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

Yours sincerely

Gary Lamb
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Diana Terris, Chief Executive, Warrington Borough Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education