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Mr Nick Wilson
Strategic Director for Children, Schools and Families
Surrey County Council
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Dear Mr Wilson

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Surrey County 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 Surrey County Council which was conducted on 9 and 10 August 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 an area of strength and areas of practice that met requirements, with some areas for development.

Two of the three areas of development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in September 2009 have been met. The premature closing of child in need cases without appropriate services in place remain as an area for development.



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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Senior managers have an excellent understanding of the strengths and areas for development in the current duty and referral arrangements. They have used this knowledge to re-organise the service and successfully secure extra funding from the council. This has enabled highly effective plans to be put in place to sustain and build upon the recent improvements to safeguard children and young people. ▪ The swift and successful implementation of a new ICS recording system has enabled managers at all levels of the council to have a clear understanding of the quality of social work intervention. This has enabled comprehensive quality assurance arrangements to be developed that are now improving service delivery in a number of areas including the quality of assessments.
The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Clear procedures and policies are in place to ensure that statutory requirements to safeguard children and young people are met. ▪ Out of hours duty arrangements are clear and robust. They link very well with the day referral services to enable a prompt, informed and effective response to safeguard children and young people. ▪ Case records are well maintained by staff. In most cases, seen by inspectors, these were up to date with evidence of them being used effectively in case planning and management decision making. ▪ Supervision is valued by staff and records demonstrate that it takes place regularly and is well recorded. Social work staff have manageable caseloads and report that their line managers are visible and that they are able to access immediate support where necessary. ▪ In most case files seen the views of children, carers and their parents are clearly recorded. Children are seen where necessary alone and their views are used to influence case planning. ▪ The quality of assessments is adequate overall, a small number are good. Assessments identify both strengths and risk. The individual needs of children as defined by their race, culture, religion and language are given appropriate attention. ▪ Staff who work in referral and assessment are suitably qualified and experienced. They are able to demonstrate that they attend relevant training including that from serious case reviews.

- Thresholds for accessing the local authority's social care service are in place and regularly reviewed.

Areas for development

- The decision making of first line managers is variable and on some occasions does not fully reflect the level of identified risk or need. This includes the prematurely closing of cases and case planning on open cases. As a consequence some children could be exposed to the risk of further harm. This was an area for development at the previous inspection.
- Work undertaken at the point of contact does not always meet the guidance in 'Working Together'. Decisions regarding new contacts made by the contact centre and also area teams are not always made within 24 hours and this leads to vulnerable children experiencing unnecessary delay in receiving services.
- Although the council recognises that initial child protection case conferences timescales do not always meet the guidance in 'Working Together' effective remedial action is yet to be taken. Delays in holding case conferences have the potential to expose vulnerable children and young people to the risk of further harm.
- The implementation of the common assessment framework has been slow. Managers recognise the need for further progress in the ownership and consistent contribution of all key statutory agencies as well as in the quality of these assessments.

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

Yours sincerely

Richard Nash
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: David McNulty, Chief Executive, Surrey County Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education