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Mr Andrew Webb
Corporate Director
Children and Young People's Directorate
Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council
3rd Floor, Stopford House
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Stockport
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Dear Mr Webb

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Stockport 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 Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council which was conducted on 23 and 24 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 strength and 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 on 16 and 17 March 2010 have been responded to. One area has been fully addressed. Two areas have been partially addressed and remain areas of development in this inspection.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ There is a comprehensive range of support and preventative services. All agencies use an agreed Stockport model which is based around Team Around the Child meetings with many agencies contributing workers to act as co-ordinators for this work. Social workers also provide an excellent preventative service through the Social Care in Partnership with Schools team. This improves communication and links with schools over child welfare issues. Inspectors identified a number of examples of positive improvements to children's lives from this work. ▪ The Children and Young People's Disability Partnership provides a high quality multi-agency service. Assessments and services are well coordinated, ensuring that all of the children's needs are considered and responded to promptly by the agencies.
The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Social workers are committed and enthusiastic about working for Stockport children's services. They have manageable caseloads and receive regular supervision. ▪ Social workers place high value on the training offered. Internal and external courses are available and workers at all levels of the organisation report that they are able to identify and attend courses which support their professional development. ▪ There are good induction arrangements for newly qualified staff including additional supervision, mentoring by experienced workers and protected caseloads. ▪ Thresholds for access to services are clear, based on Stockport's Common Processes model. Consequently appropriate contacts and referrals are made by other agencies to Stockport's children's services. ▪ The Customer Contact Centre offers timely advice and support to referring agencies and members of the public. ▪ Child protection referrals are prioritised and responded to in a timely manner by suitably qualified and experienced social workers. ▪ In the majority of cases, there is effective communication and planning during child protection investigations including timely strategy discussions and meetings with the police. ▪ Social workers spoken to by inspectors demonstrated skills in analysis and an

understanding of the risks to children, well beyond that evidenced in their written assessments.

- Information is passed appropriately between the daytime and out-of-hours service which ensures continuity of provision for children and young people.

Areas for development

- In some cases seen by inspectors inappropriate decisions had been made not to carry out an assessment when there were concerns expressed in the referral about potential significant harm to children. In a number of these cases re-referrals had been made with similar concerns.
- There is considerable variation in the quality of initial and core assessments carried out by the Early Intervention and Family Support teams. In some cases seen by inspectors there had been a lack of thoroughness in assessing concerns, which led to children's needs not being responded to promptly or fully and, in a few cases, children being left at potential risk.
- There has been insufficient senior management oversight of the day-to-day work undertaken to assess the individual needs of children and their families. However, as a result of this inspection, the local authority has responded decisively and is putting in place an action plan to tackle these concerns.
- In some cases seen by inspectors, unqualified workers in the local authority contact centre have offered inappropriate advice to referrers over child welfare concerns. It is not clear from the written records that there had been sufficient management oversight on this area of work.
- On the first day of the inspection, the electronic recording system was not functioning properly due to a malfunction in an air-conditioner unit. The system remains a source of intense frustration to workers and managers who report that as a result of continual problems they have less time to carry out direct work with children and families. Senior managers have responded to these concerns, which has significantly reduced the number of days on which it runs slowly, and consideration is being given to commissioning a new system. This was an area for development at the last inspection.
- There are delays in the provision of services for some children and young people assessed as requiring support from the Family Support teams. There is an overview of these cases by a senior manager to ensure those identified as in priority need are responded to as soon as possible.

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

Yours sincerely

Neil Penswick
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Eamonn Boylan, Chief Executive, Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education