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Mr Eric Robinson
Executive Director of Children's Services
Staffordshire County Council
Wedgewood Building
Tipping Street
Stafford
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Dear Mr Robinson

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Staffordshire 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 Staffordshire County Council which was conducted on 28 and 29 June 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 and paper 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 for priority action alongside areas of practice that met requirements and areas for development.

Some of the areas of development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in August 2010 have been addressed although further work is on-going regarding reflecting children's ethnicity, religion and cultural identity in case records, the inclusion of parents' views in assessments and case planning, and the electronic case recording system, and these remain areas for development.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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

The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The common assessment framework (CAF) is well established and regularly involves a range of agencies. ▪ Most assessments seen by inspectors were of a satisfactory standard with children seen promptly and a clear focus upon risk and protective factors. ▪ Section 47 enquiries are carried out by suitably qualified and experienced social workers. Where child protection risk is identified most strategy meetings and discussions are thorough and involve an appropriate range of agencies. ▪ Although the timeliness of case recording is variable inspectors saw a number of case records that were evaluative and clearly focused on the individual needs of the child. ▪ The quality of training is good and appropriately focused but the impact of training is not consistently evident. Newly qualified social workers are well supported and given timely opportunities to develop their social work skills. ▪ Caseloads are generally manageable and effective systems are in place to promptly allocate new work. ▪ Managers routinely undertake case audits which are well planned and focused on the quality of services. However, the findings are not always sufficiently explicit and judgements of what is good or outstanding are at times given too readily.
Areas for development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Arrangements to manage domestic violence incidents that involve children are insufficiently integrated. Referrals to the council from police colleagues are not always timely or focused which creates delay in providing a safeguarding response. ▪ Most staff receive regular supervision although in some cases formal supervision is not sufficiently challenging and focused on improving performance. ▪ The views of children, young people and parents are not being routinely used to influence practice. The views of children, young people and parents are inconsistently considered in assessments and case planning and this was an area for development at the last inspection. ▪ Case records and assessments do not sufficiently reflect children and young people's ethnicity, religion and cultural identity. This was an area for

development at the last inspection.

- Staff report that despite some recent improvements the electronic recording system is slow and unreliable. Consequently there are, on occasions, delays in recording significant case information which impacts on the ability of managers to have sufficient and effective case management oversight. The electronic case recording system was an area for development at the last inspection.
- The timeliness of initial and core assessments is poor which results in delay in decision making and service provision to children and young people.
- Arrangements for carrying out child protection medicals are not sufficiently embedded across the county. As a result some children in need of urgent medical assessment do not receive a timely or child focused service.
- There is insufficient clarity between the area teams and the Emergency Duty Service regarding the role of the Emergency Duty Service and this can lead to some children experiencing delays in receiving an immediate safeguarding service.

This visit has identified the following area for priority action:

Area for priority action

- There is a systemic weakness in responding to and investigating child protection concerns in the First Response Team. Agencies or individuals can experience significant delay in being able to make contact with the First Response Team in order to share concerns about a child. Furthermore, once a contact has been made there is often significant delay in deciding what safeguarding action to initiate, which can result in some children experiencing further harm.

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

In addition, the findings of this inspection and the identified area for priority action may have a significant impact on the annual children's service assessment. If the concerns raised by the identified area for priority action are not resolved by the findings of a subsequent inspection, the overall rating of the local authority's children's services is unlikely to be better than 'performing poorly'.

The identification of an area for priority action is likely to lead, at an appropriate time, to further inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements, a full safeguarding inspection, or a full safeguarding and looked after children inspection. If such an inspection takes place before the decision on the annual assessment, the

findings and judgement of that inspection will supersede the findings of the unannounced inspection.

Yours sincerely

Dick O'Brien
Her Majesty's Inspector

Nick Bell, Chief Executive, Staffordshire County Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education