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Ms Barbara Peacock
Executive Director for Children and Families
Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council
Shaftesbury House
402 High Street
West Bromwich
B70 9LT

Dear Ms Peacock

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Sandwell 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 Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council which was conducted on 1 and 2 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 relevant areas of improvement identified at the inspection of safeguarding and looked after children services in December 2009 were considered as part of the inspection. Evidence of progress was found in all these areas although some remain areas for development.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Children in families who do not have any recourse to public funds receive prompt and good quality support from workers and managers with specialist knowledge of this area. There is excellent policy and practice guidance for this area of work and this is consistently applied. Each case is reviewed regularly at a management panel to monitor the quality of services and ensure effective use of resources.
The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Children suffering or at risk of significant harm are appropriately identified and receive a prompt and appropriate service. ▪ Significant improvements in timeliness and consistency of responses to contacts and referrals have been achieved through the introduction of the new Sandwell Access service. Referring agencies are positive about the improved access provided by this service. This was an area for improvement from the Safeguarding and Looked After Children Inspection. ▪ Good multi-agency screening arrangements are in place to respond to contacts involving children and domestic abuse. This enables timely decision making and the prompt identification of children and families needing further assessment and support. ▪ Section 47 enquiries are thorough and always carried out by a qualified and suitably experienced social worker. Findings in relation to significant harm are clear and where necessary prompt action is taken to ensure children's safety. ▪ Ethnicity, culture, religion and linguistic needs are identified, recorded and addressed within assessments and when planning for children's needs. This was an area for improvement from the Safeguarding and Looked After Children Inspection. ▪ There are well established and integrated arrangements for responding to referrals of disabled children including those who may require child protection services. ▪ Nearly all assessments seen by inspectors contained at least an adequate level of analysis, identified risk and protective factors, included relevant consultation with partner agencies and appropriately involved parents. ▪ Children are seen alone when appropriate during initial and core assessments. This was an area for improvement from the Safeguarding and Looked After Children Inspection.

- Out-of-hours arrangements are clear and well established with effective communication between daytime and out-of-hours services. Referrals requiring emergency action to protect children out-of-hours are well managed.
- Senior managers are actively engaged in work to improve referral and assessment services and their leadership and involvement is valued by front line staff.
- Managers are using performance data and case auditing to provide a good understanding of current practice issues and to drive service improvement. This was an area for improvement from the Safeguarding and Looked After Children Inspection.
- Most staff spoke positively of the training opportunities which they have recently been able to benefit from. The council has a clear plan for workforce development in this area.
- There have been recent improvements in the monitoring and delivery of supervision with most staff now receiving regular supervision. This was an area for improvement from the Safeguarding and Looked After Children Inspection.
- Appropriate information sharing protocols are in operation with partner agencies. This was an area for improvement from the Safeguarding and Looked After Children Inspection.

Areas for development

- Although there have been recent improvements in the timeliness of assessments and decision making these are not yet consistently in line with timescales within statutory guidance.
- Most initial child protection conferences are not arranged within statutory timescales. This leads to delays in establishing multi-agency child protection plans for children at risk.
- Appropriate inter-agency thresholds have been agreed but the application of thresholds for children's social care services is not established across all agencies. This was an area for improvement from the Safeguarding and Looked After Children Inspection.
- The co-location of the common assessment framework (CAF) co-ordinator with the Sandwell Access service is improving effective use of the common assessment framework but there is not yet a fully shared understanding of which cases can be appropriately managed through use of CAF. This can result in delay in children receiving the support they require.
- The quality of recording is inconsistent and hampered by having dual paper

and electronic recording systems with some elements of the electronic recording processes described by managers and social workers as currently being cumbersome and inefficient.

- The views of children and young people are not always clearly evident in the recording of assessments or taken account of in case planning. This can result in work with vulnerable children and young people being insufficiently focused on their needs. This was an area for development from the Safeguarding and Looked After Children Inspection.
- Referrers report inconsistencies in the availability and quality of feedback on referral and assessment outcomes. This undermines their confidence in and understanding of the application of thresholds.
- While inspectors saw some very good examples of management oversight and direction this is not evident in all cases, where examples of drift were seen. Changes in front line management and the absence of a consistent and permanent first line management has hampered the effectiveness of the assessment service. This was an area for improvement from the Safeguarding and Looked After Children Inspection.
- Some staff, particularly those most experienced workers, report that their caseloads remain challenging leading to difficulties in completing work within acceptable timescales and in maintaining a reasonable work-life balance. This was an area for improvement from the Safeguarding and Looked After Children Inspection.

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

Yours sincerely

Nicholas McMullen
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Jan Britton, Interim Chief Executive, Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education