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Mr Roy Lockwood
Director for Children and Young People
Civic Centre
St Peter's Square
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West Midlands
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Dear Mr Lockwood

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Wolverhampton 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 Wolverhampton City Council which was conducted on 14 and 15 September 2010. 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.

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

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Case transfer arrangements are clear, assured and effective in ensuring continuity of planning and service delivery for children and young people. They also contribute significantly to the efficiency, effectiveness and stability of the duty and assessment arrangements.▪ Diversity is consistently recognised in the work undertaken with children and their families, particularly in relation to ethnicity, language and religion with

needs and strengths being identified well within assessments. The duty and assessment workforce appropriately reflect the diversity of the area's population and are able to provide translation support for people where English is not the first language.

- Children and young people are seen and their views, or presentation where pre-verbal, almost always considered in assessments. Their wishes and feelings also inform the planning and delivery of services. The views of parents, carers and significant others are also duly considered when undertaking assessments.
- The Disabled Children and Young People's Team has robust and effective arrangements for undertaking initial assessments of need, including for those children in need of protection. There are good arrangements to ensure effective links with the duty and assessment team with sound joint working protocols and clear lines of case responsibility.
- Supervision of practitioners is regular, planned, well established and appropriate to levels of qualification and experience. There is balanced consideration of casework, professional development and personal support for staff. Supervision audits, conducted by all managers, take place regularly, ensuring a good quality of recording.

The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas

- Agreed inter-agency thresholds for service are appropriate in relation to children in need and particularly for those with safeguarding needs. Practice and procedures conform to statutory requirements and guidance in all key respects.
- Arrangements for receiving and prioritising referrals are effective with considerable social work resource allocated to daily duty tasks.
- Cases requiring child protection investigation are appropriately identified with action being timely and effective in responding to risks to children in need of safeguarding. These assessments are always led by qualified and experienced social workers.
- Assessments are sufficiently clear in identifying needs, strengths and risks. Most contain an adequate level of analysis which enables suitable services to be identified.
- Appropriate casework and managerial decisions are made, in the majority of cases, within required timescales for children in need.
- Out-of-hours arrangements for receiving referrals are sufficiently clear with effective links to, and communication with daytime services. The social care database and background documentary records are easily accessible to the out-

of-hours duty service.

- There are effective relationships between the duty and assessment team and the Child Abuse Investigation Team of the West Midlands Police, supporting the planning and conduct of child protection enquiries.
- Senior managers have effective links to the duty and assessment team. All senior managers undertake case file and supervision audits as well as regular evaluation of qualitative and quantitative performance data to support service development.
- Managers of the duty and assessment team have continued to maintain a sufficient balance between qualified and experienced social workers and others with lower levels of expertise and specialist training.
- Social work caseloads are manageable and balanced, although the more skilled, qualified staff experience significant additional pressures due to the frequency they are required to undertake child protection enquiries.
- Morale is generally high amongst the workforce with most referring to the accessibility and responsiveness of operational managers as a key factor in this.
- Performance indicators are good in comparison to statistical neighbours and have shown a recent and consolidated improvement in some indicators such as the timeliness of assessments despite the continued increase in service demand.

Areas for development

- Checks and assessments have not been completed on a considerable number of domestic violence notifications from July 2010 following improvements in how the police manage this work.
- The implementation of the common assessment framework (CAF) has been slow. Managers recognise the need for further progress in the ownership and consistent contribution by all key statutory agencies as well as in the quality of these assessments.
- Capacity and duty commitments contribute to increased pressures on experienced social work practitioners in the duty and assessment team leading to delays in the timely completion of records of some initial assessments.
- Records format, storage and maintenance matters impact adversely on the efficiency and effectiveness of the service. Some reports are not easily accessible for service users; child protection conference outcome reports lack specific, measureable, achievable, realistic and time-bounded (SMART) objectives and contingency plans. The various local authority records systems are not linked. It is unhelpful that the social care database system is

periodically inaccessible during the working day.

- The record of child protection strategy discussions with police does not routinely result in a shared record of agreed actions and respective responsibilities, leaving a gap in effective communications.
- Training provision and support is insufficient, in some key respects, with delays in the full implementation of the support and development programme for newly qualified social workers, and lengthy waiting lists for post qualifying and some specialist training.

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

Yours sincerely

Brendan Parkinson
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Simon Warren, Chief Executive, Wolverhampton City Council
Roy Lockwood, Chair of Wolverhampton Safeguarding Children Board
Christine Mills, Lead Member for Children's Services, Wolverhampton City Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education