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Mr Clive Webster  
Executive Director of Children's Services and Learning  
Southampton City Council  
Civic Centre  
Southampton  
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Dear Mr Webster

**Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Southampton City 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 Southampton City Council which was conducted on 4 and 5 May 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 for development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in August 2010 have been considered during the inspection. The local authority developed an action plan and has made significant progress in most areas. However one area for development relating to the quality of management decisions and actions required recorded on case files is not yet fully addressed.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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

<b>Strengths</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Workforce development and recruitment strategies are effective and have substantially reduced the use of temporary staff and increased the stability of the workforce. This has enabled the council to accelerate improvement in such areas as the quality of assessments.</li> <li>▪ The council has implemented a robust action plan underpinned by rigorous monitoring and evaluation to address areas of development in the contact, referral and assessment arrangements. This has resulted in significant improvement in key areas such as the timely completion of core assessments.</li> <li>▪ The council's safeguarding joint protocol with the police for undertaking Section 47 enquiries has resulted in improved collaboration between partner agencies. It has led to the more efficient use of resources, better deployment of staff and improved the quality of assessments for children and their families. Its success has led to it being developed across Hampshire and the Isle of Wight.</li> </ul>
<b>The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Practice and procedures comply with statutory requirements to safeguard children and young people.</li> <li>▪ Communication and liaison arrangements are well established and result in prompt referrals from multi-agency partners and timely exchange of information.</li> <li>▪ All cases held within referral and assessment services are allocated to suitably qualified and experienced staff.</li> <li>▪ Children are routinely seen and interviewed where appropriate during assessments and the voice of the child is sufficiently recorded and taken into consideration in case planning.</li> <li>▪ The quality of the assessments seen was at least satisfactory, with some being good, however others remain overly descriptive and lack detailed analysis in some areas.</li> <li>▪ Record keeping is up to date and of a satisfactory standard.</li> <li>▪ Diversity issues are sufficiently considered in casework practice.</li> <li>▪ Arrangements for the assessment and support of children with disabilities are effective and in close collaboration with partner agencies.</li> </ul>

- Social workers receive regular supervision which is well structured and recorded. Staff report that they are supported by managers and value opportunities for reflective case discussion that improves their professional development and the support they provide to children and their families.
- Regular case audits by senior managers result in improved practice such as the quality of assessments.
- Effective arrangements are in place for the prompt transfer of cases from the referral and assessment services to longer term teams so that the identified needs of children and young people are addressed in a timely way.
- Information sharing and communication between the children's out of hours service and daytime services are effective in ensuring that those children identified as at risk of significant harm are appropriately safeguarded.

#### **Areas for development**

- Management decisions are routinely recorded on case files, however the quality of the decisions recorded and actions required in case plans is inconsistent. This was an area for development at the previous inspection.
- While thresholds for access to children's services are clear, decisions on whether further actions are required on contacts are not consistent. The council recognises this and is taking remedial action.
- While there is a prompt exchange of information at the point of referral, the outcomes of referrals are not routinely notified to referring agencies.

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

Yours sincerely

**Bill Wallace**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

Copy: Alistair Neill, Chief Executive, Southampton City Council  
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education