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Mr Damian Allen  
Executive Director of Children's Services  
Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council  
Education Office  
Huyton Hey Road  
Huyton  
Liverpool L36 5YH

Dear Mr Allen

## **Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council children's services**

This letter contains the findings of the recent unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within local authority children's services in Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council which was conducted on 28 and 29 July 2009. The inspection was carried out under section 138 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. It will contribute to Ofsted's annual review of the performance of the authority's children's services, for which Ofsted will award a rating later in the year.

The inspection identified one area for priority action and a number of areas for development, which are detailed below.

The inspection sampled the quality and effectiveness of contact, referral and assessment arrangements and their impact on minimising the incidence of 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. I am grateful to you and your staff for your help and the time given during this inspection.

From the evidence gathered, the inspection identified a number of areas where the contact, referral and assessment arrangements were delivered satisfactorily in accordance with national guidance, in particular:

- Appropriate decisions in respect of initial contacts and referrals that require further assessment are taken. Children and young people whose situations require assessment are correctly identified.

- The quality of completed initial and core assessments seen by inspectors is, on the whole, of a satisfactory standard.
- Children's views were recorded and taken into account in the completed assessments seen by inspectors.
- The council has already recognised the need to increase the number of core assessments. Inspectors saw evidence of an increase in the proportion of children and young people receiving a core assessment.
- Children and young people who are referred as at immediate risk of harm are subject to timely child protection investigations. These are appropriately undertaken by qualified social workers.
- Staff in the teams visited, including agency staff, receive regular supervision. They indicated that they feel well supported and have access to suitable training. Decisions reached in supervision are recorded on electronic case recording.
- A system has recently been implemented for the local safeguarding children board to receive quarterly reports in relation to the performance of contact, referral and assessment arrangements.
- Case file and supervision audits are in place and have been used to identify concerns about the standard of recording.

From the evidence gathered, the following strengths and areas for development were also identified:

<b>Strengths</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Newly qualified workers spoken to as part of the inspection felt well supported in their first year of employment and able to develop their practice as a result.</li> <li>▪ The senior management team has made good use of external consultants to thoroughly analyse the performance of the duty service. As a consequence, senior managers know the areas for improvement and are implementing plans to respond to these.</li> </ul>
<b>Areas for development</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Decisions in respect of contacts and referrals are not always taken within 24 hours.</li> <li>▪ In May 2009, the council created a borough-wide contact, referral and assessment team to respond to concerns about the quality and effectiveness of the previous arrangements. This is a temporary arrangement. This team inherited a backlog of incomplete assessments.</li> </ul>

In addition, team managers do not have sufficient access to electronic systems to enable them to track work effectively. Consequently, the situation for many of these children remains unresolved and there is significant delay in ensuring their needs are met and the relevant service provided.

- Some referrals, with concerns about possible child abuse and neglect, are inappropriately categorised as family dysfunction. This means that risks to children and young people are not clearly visible on electronic systems and the full extent of safeguarding concerns may not be accurately reflected in performance information.
- Recording practice does not assist workers and managers to recognise and manage risk effectively. Although the analysis of risk and findings in relation to significant harm are recorded, this is not clearly available within the section of the electronic case file for recording the outcome of child protection investigations. In the cases sampled, although children had been seen, this was not always clearly recorded.
- Some staff were unclear how to find policies and procedures on the intranet.
- The application of thresholds for referral is inconsistent. In some instances inappropriate referrals were made and in others there was delay in referring safeguarding concerns.
- Multi-agency partnership working is recognised by the council and its partners as an area requiring further development. The common assessment framework is used primarily as a referral tool rather than as a way of meeting children's needs at an early stage through interagency working.

This visit has identified the following area for priority action:

**Area for priority action**

- A high number of incomplete initial assessments was identified. Some of these assessments included evidence of potential risk of harm, which had been inadequately risk assessed and prioritised. In some cases, strategy discussions had not been recorded. Inspectors examined the response to concerns about five children and young people and found that, in two cases, potential significant harm had not been fully or properly investigated and in two cases the children had not been seen by social workers. Senior managers gave an immediate commitment to take appropriate action to ensure that all children and young people whose assessments are not yet completed are safe.

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

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Heather Brown", with a horizontal line underneath.

Heather Brown  
Divisional Manager, Social Care Safeguarding

Copy: Sheena Ramsey, Chief Executive, Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council  
Anita Marsland, Chief Executive NHS Knowsley and Executive Director, Well-being Services  
Graham Wright, Lead Member for Children's Services, Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council  
Andrew Spencer, Department for Children, Schools and Families