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Mr Mark Wyatt c/o Ms Pauline Sharratt
Director of Children's Services
Westox House
1 Trinity Road
Dudley
West Midlands
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Dear Mr Wyatt

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Dudley 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 Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council which was conducted on 15 and 16 June 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, satisfactory practice and areas for development.

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

Strengths

- In the cases seen by inspectors, children and young people at risk of significant harm were identified promptly, prioritised and were subject to timely child protection investigations undertaken by qualified and experienced social workers.
- Good action has been taken in the appointment of a senior practitioner social



work post to work directly with the police on domestic violence referrals. This ensures that all domestic violence referrals are screened and appropriately responded to in a timely manner.

Satisfactory practice

- Team managers are readily available to offer advice and guidance with regards to case work decision making and staff feel well supported in their work.
- From the cases seen by inspectors the quality of work undertaken by social workers is of a satisfactory standard. Children and young people are routinely seen and spoken to as part of assessments.
- The emergency duty team has good links with the assessment teams through an electronic alert system. This contributes to consistency of practice for children and young people.
- The children with disabilities team consists of suitably qualified staff, including community nurses. Child protection investigations are undertaken by this team which ensures that children with disabilities receive a consistent service.
- Newly qualified social workers receive good support and training with a programme of fortnightly supervision to help their continuing professional development.

Areas for development

- There is considerable delay in the allocation of cases requiring an initial assessment. In the three teams visited, a substantial number of cases were found to be unallocated. Where cases have been allocated for an initial assessment, there are significant delays in completion. This has resulted in some children and families not receiving a prompt and appropriate service to meet their needs and the potential for children to be left at risk of harm.
- Information relating to performance indicators is unreliable and detailed performance management information is not routinely available to team managers. Consequently there are no robust systems in place to ensure that initial and core assessments are completed within timescales.
- Although team managers undertake case file audits at the point of transfer of cases there are no systems in place to regularly audit cases. This results in a lack of management oversight to improve social work practice and performance.
- Social workers receive regular supervision but the quality is too variable. The recording of personal and professional development and the actions needed to be undertaken to move case work on is inconsistent.
- The integrated children's system has not as yet, developed beyond the

recording of initial and core assessments. All other recording, including child protection information, is placed on an alternative system and records are not up-to-date. This adversely impacts on the capacity of social workers and managers to do their work effectively.

- Although there has been an increase in the use of the common assessment framework, this is not embedded across partner agencies. As a result, there is limited evidence to demonstrate that multi-agency early interventions are having an impact in ensuring that children and families receive preventative services in a timely manner.

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

Yours sincerely

Marie McGuinness
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Mr John Polychronarkis, Chief Executive, Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council
Ms Pauline Sharratt, Chair of Dudley Safeguarding Children Board
Cllr Elizabeth Walker, Lead Member for Children's Services, Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council
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