

WIRRAL COUNCIL

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE: 14 SEPTEMBER 2010

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

ANNUAL UNANNOUNCED INSPECTION OF CONTACT, REFERRAL AND ASSESSMENT ARRANGEMENTS WITHIN WIRRAL COUNCIL'S CHILDREN'S SERVICES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The first unannounced inspection of Contact, Referral and Assessment arrangements within local authority children's services in Wirral Council was conducted by Ofsted on 20 and 21 July 2010. The letter setting out the findings of this inspection is attached to this report.

1. Background

The new national regime of annual Ofsted inspections: Contact, Referral and Assessment arrangements commenced in June 2009. The inspections are carried out under Section 138 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. The inspection contributes to the annual review of performance of the authority's children's services, for which Ofsted will award a rating later in the year.

2. Preparation for the Inspection

The inspection in Wirral was one of the latest conducted in the first round of inspections nationally. Wirral has constructively used the inspection framework to assess and embed good practice particularly throughout the past year, adopting a performance improvement approach, monitored through fortnightly Contact, Referral and Assessment Meetings. This has involved a wide range of operational managers, off line auditors and support officers directly involved in the service. Monthly meetings to report on progress have taken place with the Director of Children's Services and Senior Children's Social Care Managers, and six weekly meetings to review practice and progress have continued to take place between the Chief Executive, Director of Children's Services and Head of Branch for Children's Social Care.

2.1 Team specific plans have been presented and updated at each meeting, which have focused on the processes in place, the throughput of work and the quality of assessments. Many relevant policies and procedures have been updated and briefed out to staff through lunchtime sessions, and there has been an improved focus on the auditing of the quality of assessments on both a single and multiagency basis. During the past 12 months there have also been two "mock inspections" or practice audits undertaken, the second of which involved senior colleagues from the Learning and Achievement and Participation and Inclusion Branches.

2.2 Implementation of the new management structure and increased social work capacity throughout the past year has supported the improvement plan, in particular the new post of a dedicated manager at the Central Advice and Duty Team, and the posts of Principal and Practice Managers.

3. The inspection process

The inspection is unannounced, and the lead inspector contacts the local authority prior to nine o'clock on the day of the inspection to announce their arrival. In Wirral the three inspectors visited three of the four Assessment Teams, the Central Advice and Duty Team (CADT), and the Children with a Disability Team. Inspectors also met with two Area Team Leaders, the CAF / Quality Assurance Manager and the Emergency Duty Team Manager. During the inspection 60 children's files, one private fostering file and nine supervision files were seen. The Head of Branch and Strategic Service Manager, Children and Families were fully informed throughout the inspection. The inspectors fed back their findings on the afternoon of the second day of the inspection, to an audience which included the Leader of the Council, the Cabinet member for Children and the Chief Executive of the Council. The inspectors were professional, skilled and sensitive to local issues. Members of staff felt they engaged in constructive and knowledgeable discussion about their work.

4. Findings

The inspectors identified six strengths, many of which support the strategic direction of travel, and in particular the revised systems in operation at the "front door" into Social Care, through the work of the CADT, the rota of staff receiving incoming referrals, and the weekly monitoring systems in place.

- 4.1 Thirteen areas of satisfactory practice were identified, defined by Ofsted as "practice and arrangements that meet the requirements of statutory guidance", which included core expectations such as responding appropriately to the needs of children identified as being at risk or, or suffering significant harm.
- 4.2 Four areas of development were identified these are: improvements required in reflective supervision, and staff appraisal which informs the training plan; improved processes for responding to requests for consultation and advice sought by professionals and other callers; improvements required in recording the rationale by managers authorising assessments and consistently establishing the process for the transfer of cases from assessment to care management teams. All areas for development have been incorporated in the development plan overseen by the Contact, Referral and Assessment Meeting.
- 4.3 The findings of the inspection were briefed out to all managers involved in the inspection on the day the feedback was received, and subsequently to a wider audience of Social Care staff members on 29 July, at two consecutive Branch Communication meetings involving the Cabinet member for Children's Services and the Director of Children's Services.

5. Conclusion

This is a very positive inspection, and reflects the hard work by staff and managers to improve services for children and families. This is a challenging area of working requiring constant vigilance and attention, which will be sustained through a constant focus on maintaining and improving services still further, for some of the most vulnerable children in Wirral.

6. Risk assessment

The provision of excellent contact, referral and assessment services for children in need, at risk of significant harm or who have experienced significant harm is an area of work demanding constant attention, monitoring and oversight. The inspection has confirmed that good systems are in place to do this; however, there can never be any room for complacency. It is an area of considerable risk.

7. Financial Implications

There are no direct financial implications associated with this report.

8. Staffing Implications

In order to sustain improvements in the service it is important that a full staffing complement is maintained.

9. Equal Opportunities Implications / Health Impact Assessment

All new policies and procedures developed during the previous year have been subject to Equality Impact and Health Impact Assessments.

10. Community Safety Implications

Providing good quality contact, referral and assessment systems directly impacts on safety within the community, through the identification of risks which are assessed and mitigated through the provision of appropriately targeted services.

11. Local Agenda 21 Implications

There are no direct implications associated with this report.

12. Planning Implications

There are no direct implications associated with this report.

13. Anti – Poverty Implications

Children and families experiencing the impact of poverty are highly represented in the cohort receiving input from Children's Social Care contact, referral and assessment services.

14. Social Inclusion Implications

Many children and families referred to Children's Social Care are at risk of social exclusion.

15. Local Member Support Implications

Children and families receiving this service live in all wards across Wirral.

16. Background Papers

- Letter dated 18 August 2010 from HMI Jenny Gwilt: Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council children's services.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That:

- (1) Members note and comment on the report.

Howard Cooper
Director of Children's Services