

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Ms Alison Botham
Director of Children's Services
Torbay Children's Services
First Floor South
Town Hall
Castle Circus
Torquay
TQ1 3DR

Dear Alison,

Monitoring visit to Torbay local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Torbay children's services on the 9 and 10 January 2019. This was the first monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate, for the second time, for overall effectiveness in June 2018. The inspectors were Brenda McLaughlin and Steve Lowe, Her Majesty's Inspectors.

Inspectors evaluated the quality of help and protection provided to vulnerable children and their families in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) and in the safeguarding assessment teams (SATs). They also looked at work carried out by the early help, family intervention team (FIT).

A range of evidence was considered during the visit, including discussions with social workers, and their managers. Inspectors looked in detail at children's cases and met with senior leaders to explore reasons for the lack of progress since the re-inspection. They spoke to managers responsible for providing early help to vulnerable children. In addition, inspectors looked at local authority performance management information and they read improvement board minutes and reports on the impact of recent audit activity.

Overview

Senior leaders have failed to address the significant concerns identified during the re-inspection of Torbay children's services in June 2018. Capacity issues in the SATs and safeguarding and family support service (SAFS) are considerable, with too few social workers to carry out the work needed. This results in delays in seeing children and an inability to undertake good-quality assessments, make effective plans and take necessary and timely action. Inspectors and senior leaders remain concerned that risks to children are not being managed consistently.

Consequently, too many vulnerable children and their families do not always get the right help and protection they need.

An improvement plan, developed with partner agencies and agreed by the improvement board, is being implemented. This is focused on the widespread and serious issues identified by previous inspections. However, the plan overly concentrates on process and compliance. It is not based on a systematic evaluation of the current service weaknesses, or on a full understanding of the present experiences of children.

Improved and more reliable performance information and a revised quality assurance system are positive developments and are welcomed by team managers, but it is too soon to see the impact of these changes on children's experiences. Threshold decisions in the MASH are appropriate and mostly timely, although referral rates by professionals to children's services remain very high.

In response to the concerns identified by inspectors during this visit, senior leaders carried out an immediate review and took action to increase resources in the SATs service. They are bringing forward their plans to reconfigure the wider service.

Findings

Deficits in the quality of basic social work practice, linked to a lack of capacity in the SAT service, are significant. Caseloads are very high, with too many social workers being responsible for over 30 children. In addition, staff are also expected to routinely provide a duty service. Until recently, the SATs service was unable to transfer work to the 'long-term' SAFS teams. As a result, too many children wait too long to receive the help they require. There is too much emphasis on process and completing work within timescales. These issues were apparent during previous inspections and monitoring visits.

Decisions in the MASH continue to be made in a timely way, within 24 hours, despite the increase in contacts and referrals from professionals. Early help interventions continue to be well coordinated by the FIT. However, some children under five years old still wait for up to six weeks for a service. Stronger links with the MASH and the SAT teams and better management oversight of the work are helping to ensure that children receive the right level of targeted support. Children requiring immediate protection pass swiftly from the MASH to the SAT service. Staff in these teams conduct multi-agency child protection strategy meetings and enquiries. Not all children are visited within the required statutory timescale, and while this may be justifiable for a small number of children, for most it is not. For instance, during the past three months, approximately 20 children were not seen within 24 hours. Child protection medicals are now consistently considered and carried out when necessary by trained paediatricians. This is a vast improvement since the previous inspection.

The number of children visited within five days of a referral is improving, but is not at an acceptable level to ensure that all children are safeguarded. The 30-day local authority minimum standard for visiting children in need, many of whom who have experienced harm over a long period of time, is not based on the assessed needs of individual children, and is being reviewed by the head of service. The frequency of visits to children subject to child protection plans within 10 working days has not improved since the inspection, except for a small number of disabled children. A briefing provided to inspectors described a 'chaotic way of working', often with visits completed by different workers but not recorded or prioritised appropriately. This is exacerbated by the constant staff churn at social work and team manager level. This is extremely concerning. It means that it is not possible to track whether some children deemed to be at risk of significant harm are safe. The quality of child protection and children in need plans are too variable and do not address individual children's needs.

Assessment timeliness is beginning to improve from a low base, but too many do not reflect the level of risk and need in a family. Most assessments seen are superficial and do not show a good enough consideration of the individual characteristics of the child, their voice and their wishes and feelings. Many children have been subject to multiple assessments over a long period, sometimes for years. While there is more evidence of chronologies being collated, risks and strengths are often described rather than risk assessed and analysed. Assessments do not translate into effective and timely contingency plans. The local authority's practice model is now being used more consistently. Recent investment in workforce development and funding secured from the Department for Education are intended to ensure that all staff are fully trained in the model.

The recruitment and retention of staff are priorities and a substantial challenge for Torbay, as for other local authorities in the south west. Despite this, Torbay has successfully recruited to senior and middle manager posts. However, attracting experienced permanent social workers and frontline managers is more difficult. The service currently relies on high numbers of agency staff, leading to some children experiencing numerous changes in social worker. Nevertheless, inspectors met dedicated, skilled staff, both permanent and agency, who are committed to improving the quality of services for children. They require senior leaders to create an environment in which this can happen consistently.

Staff described to inspectors very recent positive change within the SATs service since the appointment of interim managers. The recently introduced monthly quality performance review meetings are enabling better communication between frontline managers and senior leaders and are holding managers to account for practice in their teams. Reliable performance data is helping managers understand and prioritise areas for development. Case file audits are completed regularly, but the focus is largely on compliance and now needs to move on to the quality of practice. Supervision is beginning to take place more often, and joint training with Plymouth children's services is intended to improve the quality and impact of supervision on practice.

Senior leaders and elected members in Torbay are very committed to improving standards across the entire service. Following inspectors' findings, they fully accept that the pace of change, which is currently too slow, must accelerate.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website

Yours sincerely

Brenda McLaughlin
Her Majesty's Inspector