

Freshford House
Redcliffe Way
Bristol BS1 6NL

T 0300 1231231
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 03000 130570

Safeguarding.lookedafterchildren@ofsted.gov.uk



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Mr Richard Williams
Acting Director of Children's Services
Torbay Borough Council
Oldway Mansion
Torquay Road
Paignton
TQ3 2TE

Dear Mr Williams

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Torbay 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 Torbay Borough Council which was conducted on 11 and 12 October 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 practice that met requirements, with some areas for development.

The areas of development identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in May 2010 have been addressed with two exceptions which are referred to in this letter.

The three areas of priority action identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in May 2010 have been addressed and are no longer areas of priority action.

Six of the areas for development identified at the safeguarding and looked after inspection that took place 13 to 24 September 2010 have been addressed.



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

The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas

- Supervision arrangements are effectively established. Newly qualified social workers are well supported in their development through protected caseloads and close management support. Social workers report that they are supported by line managers. Supervision files indicate that most receive regular and appropriately challenging supervision. This was an area of priority action at the last inspection.
- Thresholds for accessing the local authority's social care service are now consistently applied. This was an area for development at the previous inspection.
- Caseloads of social workers in the assessment teams are manageable and allow vulnerable children and young people to receive prompt safeguarding services. This was an area for development at the previous inspection.
- Children, when seen to be suffering from or at risk of suffering significant harm, receive a prompt and appropriate service from suitably qualified and experienced social workers. This was an area for development at the previous inspection.
- All child protection cases are allocated to and assessed by staff who are qualified social workers. This was an area for development at the last inspection.
- Transfer processes are now effective. This allows the timely transfer of cases to other social care teams and enables children and young people's needs to be addressed in a timely way. This was an area for development at the last inspection.
- The timeliness of initial child protection conferences has improved and in most cases reviewed during the inspection were within statutory time limits. This was an area for development at the last inspection.
- The council and senior managers are developing a clear understanding of the strengths and areas for development within the intake team. For example they have increased the staffing ratio by five qualified social workers and increased management capacity. This has enabled them to take effective action to address significant resource pressures and begin to make service improvements.
- Clear procedures and policies are in place to inform practice and ensure that statutory requirements to safeguard and protect children and young people are met.

- Out of hours duty arrangements are clear and are appropriately linked to the day referral processes. This ensures that children and young people's needs are promptly assessed.

Areas for development

- Although no children were identified during the inspection as being left inadequately protected, case records do not always indicate whether managers and social workers take timely action to re-assess a child or young person's changing circumstances or the emergence of critical new information.
- Equality and diversity issues are insufficiently addressed in assessment and planning. In most cases children are seen alone and their wishes and feelings are recorded. However, the individual needs of children as determined by their family and cultural background often remain unexplored. This was an area for development at the previous inspection.
- The quality of assessments has improved in relation to timeliness and effectiveness in identifying potential risk. However, the input from key partners in assessments is limited. Analyses of risk does not routinely comment upon whether a child or young person has, or is likely to suffer significant harm and recommendations are sometimes insufficiently clear. This was an area for development at the last inspection.
- Systems to ensure that all social work staff understand and benefit from learning from serious case reviews conducted both locally and nationally are not well developed. This was an area of development at the last inspection.
- There has been an improvement in the quality of performance management information and case file audits are regularly undertaken and feedback is given to individual practitioners. However, audit findings are not collated to identify practice issues and improve performance. This was an area for development at the last inspection.
- Case work decision making by managers is inconsistent. Although no children or young people were left unprotected, in a small proportion of cases examined by inspectors there were delays in moving from child in need planning to child protection enquiries. This can lead to vulnerable children and young people not receiving services that are fully commensurate with their needs.
- Telephone strategy discussion between children's social care and the police are routinely held before child protection enquiries commence. However, such an approach does not enable other partner agencies to fully contribute to case planning and risk analysis.

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

Yours sincerely

Richard Nash
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Elizabeth Raikes, Chief Executive, Torbay Borough Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education