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Nancy Meehan
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Dear Nancy,

Monitoring visit of Torbay children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Torbay children's services on 8 January 2020. The visit was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate for the second time in June 2018. The inspectors were Brenda McLaughlin and Emmy Tomsett, Her Majesty's Inspectors.

The newly appointed interim deputy director has a realistic understanding of the challenges and scale of poor practice and outcomes for vulnerable children in Torbay. Together with managers and social workers, she is taking urgent action to begin to address the long-standing concerns. It is too soon to evaluate the impact of these changes, but inspectors are encouraged about the scale of the work that has been achieved since their monitoring visit in October 2019.

Areas covered by the visit

Due to the serious and widespread concerns identified during the three previous monitoring visits, inspectors revisited and re-evaluated the quality of help and protection provided to vulnerable children and their families in safeguarding assessment teams (SATs) and in the safeguarding and family support service (SAFS). They also evaluated the recent changes to the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) and the improved arrangements to help and protect sexually and criminally exploited children.

During the visit, inspectors specifically assessed the application of thresholds and the effectiveness of practice when responding to children at risk of harm and in need of help and protection since the October 2019 visit. Inspectors also evaluated the effectiveness of assessment and planning, and the quality of managerial oversight and supervision. Inspectors considered children's case records, performance management, audit activity and quality assurance information. They reviewed the minutes of the improvement board and the revised improvement plan.

Overview

Since the October 2019 monitoring visit, Torbay's chief executive and director of children's services (DCS) have acted to strengthen the senior leadership team. The appointment of additional interim senior staff and a decision to recruit a dedicated Torbay DCS as well as an independent commissioner are intended to drive the essential changes more quickly to protect and help children. Newly appointed interim senior leaders are very clear about the huge amount of further work that is required to secure minimum practice standards for all vulnerable children across the spectrum of services, from the 'front door' to care leavers. They are beginning to lay the foundations on which to build sustained change by setting out a clear and ambitious vision while simultaneously addressing immediate areas of concern. There is considerable political support, including financial investment to underpin wholesale change.

Inspectors welcome the very recent accelerated pace of change, but share leaders' concerns about the highly variable quality of practice. Too many children are still not seen often enough and wait too long for services. Children in need and child protection plans do not address the individual needs of children. Poor case recording is linked to the high workloads in the frontline teams. Caseloads for social workers in SATs and SAFS are extremely high and need to reduce exponentially so that social workers have time to plan their work and build relationships with children. High numbers of agency staff at all levels in all teams increase the risk to implementing and sustaining change.

Findings and evaluation of progress

There is emerging evidence of a coherent systematic approach to cultural change based on a thorough identification and analysis of the significant weaknesses and areas of strength. This new approach, led by the interim deputy director and the recently appointed improvement board chair, involves key frontline staff and managers and is supported by an augmented improvement plan. Candid, steadfast frontline managers, who met with inspectors, were unequivocal in their praise about the proposed changes. They have welcomed an inclusive and open management style that is no longer 'haphazard', but is based on a holistic and systematic analysis of the specific needs of Torbay children.

A review of the MASH, led by a newly appointed interim head of service, found that while decisions were timely, statutory thresholds were not fully understood or acted on. Audits found that there had been ineffective screening of children living in situations of parental domestic abuse, and of children who had been criminally or sexually exploited. The response to anonymous referrals was inconsistent. New arrangements to track work and ensure that children receive the correct level of help are being implemented. Daily meetings with partner agencies to share vital safeguarding information have been established. Consequently, there has been an increase in the number of children requiring a statutory assessment. Accelerated

work is required across the partnership to provide early and targeted help so that harm to children and young people can be prevented sooner.

Highly committed social workers report that they are well supported by accessible and visible managers who sit alongside teams; these colleagues noted that support from team managers is the reason that children's services staff remain in Torbay. These managers are constantly available to talk about children and debrief staff when they return from visits to families. Staff morale is good. Improved quality in management direction at the point of allocation is helping social workers to understand what they need to do during the assessment period. As a result, the quality of some assessments is beginning to improve, and better examples demonstrate effective and thoughtful engagement with families and a good understanding of children's experiences. For instance, inspectors saw highly effective work to reunify young children with their parents. In these circumstances, social workers carefully consider family history, and consistently strong efforts are made to understand the impact of parental cultures, mental illness, poverty and domestic abuse. Conversely, however, inspectors also identified examples where managers did not take into consideration previous child protection concerns, and this led to delays in planning for unborn children. In addition, inspectors raised concerns about child protection procedures and child protection medicals not being convened out of hours.

Most managers know the children who they are responsible for well. Nevertheless, some management recording is weak. Routine supervision, including that for some newly qualified staff, is not frequent enough. This is partially explained by the high volume of work. For example, social workers who met with inspectors are too often responsible for over 30 children, and a small number are responsible for as many as 40 children. The appointment of two new teams in the SATs and SAFS is intended to reduce the very high caseloads.

In most cases, risks are identified, but visits to see children are not always swift following referral. A high number of cases sampled show multiple repeat referrals and poor use of chronologies and historical information to assess risk to children. The quality of child protection and child in need plans is mostly poor and not specific enough to measure what needs to change for individual children. Long delays in accessing victim and perpetrator domestic abuse programmes adversely affect children and lead to avoidable delay.

A recently appointed interim exploitation coordinator has introduced revised guidance and training for all staff to raise awareness about children going missing and about all characteristics of child exploitation. Consequently, for the first time, complex strategy meetings are being convened. These meetings effectively identify and map children who are victims of criminal exploitation. Joint work and information-sharing with police is helping to protect these children, as well as vulnerable adults whose homes are being used to sell drugs.

The recruitment and retention of staff continues to be a high priority and challenge for Torbay. Senior leaders, including the chief executive, are working diligently to

ensure that Torbay is an attractive place to work, and succession planning for permanent senior staff is prioritised. At the time of this visit, 78% of staff in the SATs team and 43% of staff in the SAFS were from agencies. A comprehensive recruitment and retention strategy is being implemented. The deputy director is leading on enhanced support for newly qualified staff and the development of a social work academy. All newly qualified staff have protected caseloads and benefit from good training and support.

Performance management systems are improving from a low base. Action to reduce the number of panels that staff need to attend prior to accessing resources is positive. A revised quality assurance framework and a new audit framework are welcomed by staff. Weekly data is scrutinised by managers and is improving compliance. Dip sampling and auditing of children's records is now informing priorities and action. It is early days, but staff report that, for the first time, they welcome audits because the focus is on improving children's experiences, rather than merely on whether they have complied with a process. A systematic approach to ensure that audit findings are followed through by frontline managers is still required. Nevertheless, findings from routine and thematic audit activity is providing senior managers with a more assured evaluation of social work practice and is enhancing first line managers' ability to recognise good practice.

In summary, very recent changes and actions are starting to create a culture of high expectation and an environment in which understanding the child's world is central to all activity and practice. The new leaders already know the service well. They are rightly very concerned about the drift and delay and about the failures since the last inspection to embed sustainable changes at every level. They also recognise that huge fragilities in the system remain due to the high volume of work.

A recently completed self-assessment shows that leaders have a sound understanding of the key priorities for improvement and recognise the immense challenges they face. Leaders are highly visible and accessible, inspiring increased confidence within the workforce. It is vital that these early signs of progress are secured and sustained and that the pace of change accelerates across all service areas.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Brenda McLaughlin
Her Majesty's Inspector