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11 May 2021

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Dear Nancy

Focused visit to Torbay local authority children's services

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic.

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Torbay children's services on 24 and 25 March 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors were Margaret Burke, Caroline Walsh, Tonwen Empson, Steve Lowe and Andy Whippey.

The methodology for this visit was in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. However, the delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. This visit was carried out remotely. Inspectors used video and telephone calls for discussions with local authority and education staff, managers and leaders, children and young people, and foster carers. The lead inspector and the director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this remote visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Management directions and plans for children, so that they contain specific actions that directly relate to addressing what needs to be done, within clear timescales.
- The quality of supervision, to ensure that identified actions on children's plans are followed through in a timely manner and, where required, consider time-specific remedial actions or escalation.

- The sufficiency and availability of highly specialist placements provision, the suitability of aftercare and the range of housing options for care-experienced young people (care leavers).
- More specific support to care experienced young people to help prepare them for the adult world and the challenges they may face, and to sustain their accommodation arrangements.

Findings

- Torbay council has continued to provide services for children throughout the pandemic. Leaders responded to the challenges of COVID-19 by adjusting their improvement plans and sought different ways to maintain oversight of children and services. Risk assessments have been conducted to identify the most vulnerable children and the local authority has worked effectively with partners to continue to identify, and provide support to, children and their families, to maintain essential services and to develop virtual services. Despite the pandemic, the progress made in improving services for children in Torbay, noted at the previous monitoring visit in January 2020, has continued. Structures and strategic partnerships are now more firmly embedded, and positive steps have been made towards delivering the authority's children's services improvement plans.
- Staff have benefited from comprehensive guidance and sensitive support while delivering services under COVID-19 restrictions. Good oversight and support for staff at the front door of children's services have enabled them to continue to identify and respond effectively to the most vulnerable children, including those at risk of exploitation. The day-to-day management and responses to referrals in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) have not been hindered by increased referral rates or the pressures of the new ways of working. The risks to children and their needs continue to be carefully considered, and decisions and responses are timely and proportionate. MASH partners are fully involved, albeit virtually, in decision-making.
- Partners are fully involved in strategy meetings and risks to children are carefully considered. Child protection enquiries take place when required. Records include all key actions but are not all consistently well recorded. While children were not left at immediate risk of harm, a very small number of children did not receive a sufficiently swift response.
- Managers and senior leaders recognise that the quality of services to children remains too inconsistent. The quality of the support provided to children on child protection or child in need plans is still too variable. In more recent child protection planning, positive efforts have been made to engage with families, and the expected outcomes of the child protection plans are increasingly becoming more explicit. However, action is not always taken quickly enough for children for a small proportion of children on child protection plans whose circumstances do not improve. Steps taken by senior managers to track and more scrupulously oversee the progress of children on long-term child protection plans are

beginning to improve this. Child protection chairs do not consistently escalate concerns when they arise.

- Pre-proceedings work now actively tracks all children when they enter the Public Law Outline (PLO). Plans are monitored for compliance in terms of timescales and, increasingly, for the quality of work in preparation for court and final care plans. Work is in the early stages to capture the impact of interventions on improving outcomes for children, particularly for those families where progress is made, and children are successfully diverted from court proceedings.
- Visits to children have continued to take place during the pandemic, with reasonable adjustments made following effective risk assessments. Social workers make determined efforts to continue to see children. Performance data demonstrates month-on-month improvement in this area. The quality of recording of these visits varies. While inspectors saw some good examples of records which evidenced positive engagement and communication with children, other records were either brief, or, for a very small number, the individual visits had not been recorded.
- Gaps in the leadership of the children with disabilities team have existed for several months and this has only very recently been resolved through a temporary secondment. The new manager is now providing the team with a clearer safeguarding focus and more consistent case management.
- Strategic and operational partnership working to identify trends and exploitation hotspots is improving. Exploitation assessments are helping to identify those children who are at most risk of criminal or sexual exploitation, to stimulate regular operational discussions and to shape interventions to protect them. This is a marked improvement from previous monitoring visits when there was little, or no, knowledge of the extent of the exploitation of children in Torbay.
- Effective systems are in place that help to identify children who are home educated or missing education. The systems, and their use, have stood up to the test of increased numbers of children becoming home educated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders engage with schools and families effectively to understand why children are being home educated and to successfully support children returning to school when it is in their best interest to do so. Local authority leaders demonstrate a good understanding of the reasons children are not in full-time education. They work closely with key partners to ensure that children in these families, and all vulnerable pupils, are known.
- Most children who are newly cared for are promptly matched with carers in homes that meet their needs. They are able to live with their brothers and sisters when appropriate. Careful attention is paid to ensuring that children have family time, and this is sensitively arranged.
- Social workers have ensured that children's health assessments and reviews are completed within the required timeframe. The difficulties in securing dental check-ups as a result of COVID-19 restrictions, impacted on the availability of dental appointments which, for many children, remain overdue.

- Services are available for children and foster carers to support children's mental and emotional health needs. Some young children are benefiting from play therapy, and when children do not meet the threshold for services from child and adolescent mental health services, specialist support can be requested via the access to resource panel.
- Throughout the pandemic, most cared for children have continued to live in stable homes that meet their needs. This was verified by members of 'The Circle' (the children in care council). Comparatively high numbers of children have achieved certainty in their homes within the last year, despite court delays.
- Most cared for children have made progress in their education during the COVID-19 pandemic. They have continued to attend school and are well supported by the virtual school. The virtual school has maintained communication with schools' designated teachers and carers throughout this period. However, a small number of children are not on a school roll and therefore are not getting their full education entitlement.
- Senior leaders regularly review and monitor the arrangements for children living in unregulated placements. This oversight and scrutiny extends to a very small number of children who, due to the unavailability of highly specialist provision, are inappropriately living in unregistered placements. Continued work is required to ensure the sufficiency of suitable placements for all cared for children and care experienced young people.
- Care experienced young people have continued to receive good support from their personal advisers (PAs), who demonstrate an eagerness to do the best for them. When care experienced young people disengage from the service, risks are identified, and efforts are made to re-engage them. The service has been largely successful in encouraging and promoting education, employment and training opportunities for care experienced young people.
- While good consideration is given to young people's health needs, some care experienced young people have had difficulties accessing timely support for their emotional and mental health needs.
- Leaders recognise that housing options for care experienced young people are limited. A very small number of young people have been placed in bed and breakfast accommodation. The risks and detrimental impact of these arrangements on the emotional well-being of young people were recognised by their PAs. Although some arrangements were put in place, they were not fully effective in reducing the impact as young people waited for a suitable follow-on placement.
- Care experienced young people told inspectors, and it is evident from their records, that not enough is being done to help prepare them for the adult world. This impacts on their capacity to successfully negotiate challenges in adult life and to sustain their accommodation arrangements.
- Strong political, corporate, and financial support for children's services has continued throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Strategic partnerships are now

stronger and include voluntary and community sector partners. Most partners report that they are beginning to see improvements in safeguarding services, although some report that the lack of consistency in social worker support continues to affect services for children and their families.

- Torbay children's services have made great strides in their approach to evaluating the quality and impact of their work. Regular management reports are available to managers at all levels to track the progression of work with children and their families. Quality assurance processes evident at the previous monitoring visit have been strengthened. Such processes provide opportunities for managers to better understand children's experiences, improve decision-making and develop services.
- The quality of casework supervision and effectiveness of management oversight across the service, identified at the previous two inspections, are still too variable. Although inspectors saw increased oversight via panel arrangements, and observed supervision and management notes on most records, their impact is limited. These measures are not yet routinely providing all social workers with sufficient steer, challenge or reflection to ensure that essential actions are followed through and work progresses in a timely way for children.
- Social workers report that the senior leadership team is more visible. Staff value the support that they have received throughout the pandemic as well as the introduction of the new service model and the ambitious learning and development culture. This has helped to accelerate the pace of change over the past six months. Social work caseloads, while reducing, continue to be too high for a small number of workers, which impacts on their ability to do more for their children. Securing a high-quality workforce is a priority for leaders in Torbay and they continue to have some successes in their focus on recruitment.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning your next inspection or visit.

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

Yours sincerely

Margaret Burke
Her Majesty's Inspector