

9 March 2022

Melissa Caslake
Chief Officer for Children's Services
Devon County Council
County Hall
Topsham Road
Exeter
EX2 4QD

Dear Melissa

Monitoring visit to Devon children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Devon children's services on 2 and 3 February 2022. Her Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Steve Lowe and Tracey Ledder. This was the second monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in January 2020. It follows a monitoring visit in September 2020, and a subsequent focused visit to Devon in May 2021 to assess the quality of social work practice during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- Making sure that decisions taken by the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) are acted on.
- Professional curiosity and the quality of assessments.
- The quality of recorded management oversight and critical challenge.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

A surge in referrals about children who may be in need or at risk of harm during the COVID-19 pandemic, acute staff shortages and high caseloads in the initial response teams (IRT) are all contributing to many children and families not yet receiving the help they need at the time they need it most.

In particular, many children for whom there are concerns of significant harm are not seen quickly enough. Some families are unnecessarily subjected to repeated child

protection investigations; managers' recommendations are not always followed, and their application of thresholds for different levels of intervention is inconsistent. Professional curiosity is hampered by a lack of time to reflect on the best way forward for families. Consequently, many children remain in unsafe and neglectful circumstances for too long.

However, in the last four months, a permanent senior leadership team with a clear understanding of what needs to improve has begun to address the serious weaknesses in Devon. During this time, the introduction of a new practice model, supported by external partners, has become increasingly understood by social workers and they are enthusiastic about the future. Elected members and corporate leaders now prioritise children and families and acknowledge the need to make changes more quickly.

Findings and evaluation of progress

The oversight of contacts and referrals about children coming into the MASH is mostly timely in terms of making decisions more quickly and largely directs referrals to the right service in line with the needs of the child and their family. An unprecedented increase in referrals over the summer of 2021 has begun to plateau.

Management oversight in the MASH is now well established at several points in the process for assessing and making decisions about contacts and referrals. This is helping social workers to prioritise their work more effectively. Managers and social workers are using the RAG (red-amber-green) rating system more confidently. Those children for whom there is the greatest risk of significant harm are clearly identified and their cases passed on to the IRTs for strategy discussions and any consequent child protection investigations.

In response to the last inspection, daily meetings now take place between the police and the local authority to discuss and consider situations of risk, including domestic abuse. This allows intelligence and known information to be shared and discussed in a planned and focused way and has slightly reduced delay in the response to families. In addition, the police and local authority are developing a better understanding of each other's roles and responsibilities. However, some unilateral decision-making remains, and on occasion children are seen solely by police officers when social workers should also be present.

There is still work to do in terms of how these meetings and channels of communication are used effectively. In particular, the application of thresholds within the MASH, IRT and early help and the quality of analysis remain inconsistent. During the focused visit in May 2021, concerns were raised about managers changing decisions without consultation. While professional challenge is increasing and routine discussion of thresholds has begun, this practice continues, resulting in uncertainty and stress for families.

Revised processes are supporting clearer decision-making in the MASH. However, social workers and their managers are often too focused on the limited question of whether these processes have been complied with. They do not consistently use their professional judgement to go beyond this and ensure that decisions about visiting children match the individual needs of each child. Consequently, vulnerable children are too often left waiting for a visit by a social worker for longer than they should be. The use of several different recording systems further exacerbates the situation.

Communication between the MASH and the IRT social workers remains under-developed, and prioritising who is going to visit children and by when sometimes suffers as a result.

Strategy discussions are not always timely and the actions they generate for subsequent investigations are often unrealistic. Many child protection investigations are completed too quickly, with only a minimum number of visits to the family, children not being seen on their own and without a full assessment of risk. The completion of multiple investigations without any signs of improvement in children's circumstances is still common. This is symptomatic of a service under pressure that does not have the confidence to 'hold' risk at a level that has the best chance of sustained success. Senior leaders have recognised this and link it to high social work caseloads, the need to invest in early help and the absence of a clear practice model, and have strategies in place to address these key factors.

Senior leaders have an ambition and a plan for the MASH, early help and the IRTs to become a single 'front door' working together with a focus on 'what is best for the child today'. For some children at immediate risk of harm this ambition is yet to be realised.

The high caseloads of social workers in the IRTs make it very difficult for them to pause and reflect on the best way forward for individual children while juggling priorities daily, with many workers reporting that they work additional hours to keep up with demand. Workforce stability was a major problem at the point of the last focused visit, but while recruiting and retaining social workers is a priority that senior leaders fully understand and have a strategy to address, the situation is yet to improve.

Social workers in the IRTs include children's views and the view of parents in their assessments but their wider recording of visits and other work with children is largely descriptive and lacking in evaluation. Analysis of risks, strengths and next steps is often brief. Despite this, some social workers undertake direct work with children through play and try to effect change during the assessment, but this is uncommon.

The recent introduction of additional early help staff in the MASH has begun to shape and to improve decisions about what specific resources are available to families. Similarly, the intensive family intervention team and Bridges (the team supporting

families to stay together rather than children coming into care) are making a positive difference to families. These teams have small and controlled caseloads with extensive clinical and specialist support, and visit families regularly and with a clear purpose. When children go missing, the Reach team completes the majority of return home conversations. Not all conversations are completed within the expected timescales, due to a build-up of work over weekends. Increasingly, children are offered support from those who know them best, as well as these specialist practitioners.

The majority of early help is still requested and delivered through the four localities. Practitioners speak with great excitement about the future and give several examples of harnessing local resources creatively to help families in a way that makes sense to them.

Managers' decisions are inconsistent in terms of clarity and quality. Some offer clear direction and others summarise the current situation rather than giving clear next steps to social workers. Not all decisions made by managers are followed, and decisions as to why are not yet clearly recorded.

Practitioners receive supervision more regularly than at the time of Ofsted's last visit and managers are accessible for support and guidance between supervisions. Supervision discussions also routinely include professional development. Case reflection and revisiting plans when social workers are feeling stuck as to how to achieve progress for children are seen in small pockets, such as the specialist teams, but are not routinely present in the management of social workers completing core statutory work.

Staff report that the new senior leadership team is very visible and they have more confidence that things will change and get better. Although the impact of the new leadership team was limited at the time of this visit, improved communication, the dissemination of the new practice model and more accessible leaders are encouraging building blocks. Social workers, including those who are under intense pressure, are beginning to feel listened to and included in the direction of travel. Senior managers have increased the level of auditing and sampling of work, leading by example and carrying out some of this work themselves to get a real understanding of the quality and impact of practice. As a result, they have an accurate picture of what needs to improve and the findings of this visit largely mirror their own self-assessment.

Importantly, elected members and corporate leaders are embracing the need to change after a long period of poor outcomes for families in Devon and are progressively prioritising children in the council's plans.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Steve Lowe
Her Majesty's Inspector