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Alison Botham  
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Dear Alison

### **Monitoring visit of Torbay local authority children's services**

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

The local authority is starting to make some progress, from an extremely low base, in improving services for its children and young people, but these improvements remain exceedingly fragile.

### **Areas covered by the visit**

Due to the serious and widespread child protection concerns identified in the January 2019 monitoring visit, inspectors revisited and 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). Specifically, inspectors considered the application of thresholds and the effectiveness of practice when responding to children at risk of harm and in need of help and protection. They also evaluated the effectiveness of assessment and planning and the quality of managerial oversight and supervision. Inspectors reviewed a range of evidence, including children's case records, as well as case performance management and quality assurance information. Inspectors held case discussions with social workers and their managers and met with health and educational professionals.

### **Overview**

Since the previous visit, recruiting enough experienced social workers has been difficult. Senior leaders responded appropriately by redeploying staff from the

intensive family support service to the SATs. Initially, this helped to reduce social work caseloads, but this reduction has not been sustained. High caseloads in the longer-term SAFS persist, and there are too few social workers to carry out the work needed. Consequently, too many children are not seen often enough by the same worker. Social workers and their managers are working extremely hard to cover the basics but, because of competing priorities, are unable to intervene effectively with many children in need of help and protection. As a result, the quality of practice for a significant number of children is extremely concerning. Nevertheless, inspectors did find some good examples of effective multi-agency assessments and interventions that are making a real difference to children. A significant strength in Torbay is the commitment of staff and managers to do the right thing for children. Most social workers told inspectors that despite the high levels of work, they like working in Torbay and feel well supported.

An additional team of interim workers and managers begins work in Torbay at the end of April for 12 months. Senior leaders are aware of where pressures lie and have a considered strategy for how best to utilise this extra resource. However, the wider issue of staff retention remains a priority as staff leaving at short notice results in too many changes for families. Stability in the senior leadership team is improving, as is permanence of frontline managers. Increased support led by the chief executive's team and stronger strategic partnership arrangements are setting the foundations for medium-term and longer-term improvement. A corporate commitment to additional resources and commissioning role is in place. The implementation of the multi-agency early help strategy is positive and has the potential to address how families can get help earlier, reducing the need for statutory involvement.

Compliance with basic statutory requirements is improving from a low base. A revised practice standards policy developed in consultation with staff sets out clear expectations about what needs to improve. More children are being visited within the local authority's prescribed timescales, and the timeliness of assessments continues to improve. However, the quality of this work is still highly variable. There is insufficient evidence that audit activity is targeted appropriately, or that it helps to improve practice and identify children who are not safe. Management oversight, although improving in frequency, is not having enough impact on children's progress and in too many cases it is not preventing drift and delay for these children. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) are not consistently effective in addressing deficits in their own practice, or in escalating concerns.

## **Findings and evaluation of progress**

Leaders are aware that practice is not consistently safe enough for too many children in Torbay and are working diligently to address the significant deficits. Caseloads are still too high. Leaders accept that the pace of change needs to accelerate. The additional social work teams starting at the end of April and recent initiatives to transfer special guardianship work to the fostering services are positive developments, intended to reduce the pressure on the frontline teams. Leaders are

cognisant that these are interim measures allowing them the space to work with staff and partner agencies to find longer-term solutions.

Children and family assessments vary in quality and timeliness. Too many do not accurately reflect the individual child's experiences, and important documents are often left blank or partially completed. Substantial delays in recording information on some children's files means that it is not possible for managers to track whether work is being progressed. This is concerning given the constant churn in agency staff.

Inspectors found some examples of strong analytical assessments. Thresholds for child protection are being applied more consistently, resulting in proportionate action to protect more children, which is encouraging. However, while children are being seen more regularly, due to high caseloads many social workers do not have time to carry out purposeful direct work. Children in need and child protection plans are mostly insufficient in driving change. They are not making a difference to many children's day-to-day lived experiences quickly enough. Competing priorities for staff in the SAFS mean that many children in need assessments are not routinely updated or reviewed. Some of these children have been known to services for lengthy periods of time. During the visit, senior leaders agreed with inspectors that an audit of all children in need cases is required.

Performance management arrangements not yet fully embedded. Regular scrutiny of data at monthly quality assurance performance meetings provides a forum for constructive challenge, holding frontline managers and senior leaders to account for timely improvements across services. This is helping to change the culture, with evidence of more collaboration between teams and much improved communication. More needs to be done to ensure that agreed actions from these meetings are completed and tracked. Insufficiently targeted case file audit activity since the January visit meant that only 12 children's cases were audited in the SATs and SAFS teams. Consequently, senior managers do not have a comprehensive understanding of children's experiences in this most high-risk area of practice. In addition, social work practice is not routinely analysed or documented by managers in supervision to demonstrate that work is making a sustained difference to vulnerable children's lived experiences. The work of the IRO service is underdeveloped. It needs to do more to improve child protection planning and to routinely track progress for children between reviews.

A therapeutic support programme led by child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) adds depth and focus to assessments and interventions in the SATs and SAFS. Social workers and children have immediate access to this support as the therapist sits alongside the intervention teams. There is evidence that children, including those contemplating self-harm, have better lives because of the direct work they receive. Currently, this pilot project is under-resourced. The local authority is committed to expanding the CAMHS team. In addition, effective work by the virtual school supports designated teachers, all of whom have access to accredited trauma-based training. This is making a difference to helping staff support vulnerable children to remain in school.

The recruitment and retention of staff is a priority and huge challenge for Torbay. The service currently relies on high numbers of agency staff, particularly in SATs and SAFS. Too many children experience constant changes in social workers, so are unable to develop trusting relationships with them. Senior leaders show a relentless commitment to workforce development and training. Along with other initiatives, they are actively promoting the 'growing your own' recruitment of social workers, with a comprehensive training and support package for newly qualified workers.

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**