

Gloucestershire council sorry for 'serious failings' in children's services

Ofsted says poor leadership led to children being put at risk and that standards had deteriorated since inspection in 2011

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Gloucestershire county council said responsibility for its dire performance lay with the senior leadership team.

Gloucestershire county council has been forced to apologise after an [Ofsted](#) report into its children's services division questioned the integrity of the senior leadership team and found that "serious and widespread failures" were putting children at risk.

The [damning report](#) found that the quality of support given to families had "deteriorated significantly" since a previous "inadequate" rating of some aspects of its performance in 2011. While one area, adoption, was rated "good", inspectors described a culture in which relationships between managers and frontline social workers had broken down.

Despite its relatively affluent profile with few pockets of deprivation, the local authority is one of 29 in England to be given the worst Ofsted rating for its children's services.

"We are very sorry to the children and families affected," said Gloucestershire council's chief executive, Pete Bungard, who acknowledged instances of poor case work, but said the responsibility for the council's dire performance lay squarely with the children's services senior leadership team.

Guardian

“We have 500 committed social work staff and I don’t think it’s their fault. They have been let down by poor leadership and practice.”

Ofsted was alerted to problems in Gloucestershire’s children’s services by what the report said were “an unprecedented number” of whistleblowing concerns. A four-week county-wide inspection into every aspect of child protection and safeguarding in Gloucestershire uncovered inadequate management, failures to identify poor social work, failure to identify risks to children, poor quality and delayed assessments that left children exposed to danger, badly maintained case records and significant delays in starting care proceedings for the most needy children.

Some staff, the report said, “feel vulnerable, unsupported by senior managers and fearful of challenging and exposing poor practice. Relationships between senior managers and practitioners have broken down”.

The council said cuts were not to blame, pointing to a £2m investment in social workers last year and an additional £9.2m in funding for children’s services that has just been agreed. Several key members of staff have retired, left the council, or been demoted in recent weeks.

Serious concerns about the performance of the council’s children’s services department had already been raised in a number of excoriating family court judgments published over the last two years. In March 2015, the most senior family judge in the region, Stephen Wildblood QC, [lambasted the council’s social workers](#) for “the most extreme example of institutional failure” he had witnessed in the courts. In a further [September 2015 ruling](#), he described “very poor practice” and criticised the council’s decision-making and costly mismanagement in an adoption case. A council committee had also raised its concerns.

There were also concerns about the length of time decisions take, with experts saying that delays were damaging for children. In January this year, documents seen by the Guardian showed that the council missed the statutory six-month target for a permanent decision to be made on children’s futures in 44.4% of cases, an unusually high failure rate. Nearby Bath and north-east Somerset missed the target in 23.25% of cases, while south Gloucestershire did so in 4.8%.

The inexperience of the large number of newly qualified social workers on the council’s staff was highlighted in the Ofsted report. A freedom of information (FoI) request by the Guardian shows that at the end of November last year, 49% of Gloucestershire’s frontline child protection social workers were 18 months qualified or less, and had little experience with which to make vital judgments about how to protect children at risk.

Guardian

Bungard on Tuesday confirmed that half of the remaining frontline social work staff were less than two years qualified.

The FoI also revealed that two-thirds of frontline social workers were in post for less than three years before being promoted to a team manager role. Ofsted warned of a shortage of good supervision in the department.

High turnover of staff was also identified as a problem in the report. Figures provided to the Guardian revealed that Gloucestershire's spending on agency staff had risen from £1,264,655 in 2014-15 to £1,414,784 in 2015-16.