

Record of Officer Decision

Hearing Impairment Units

Decision Taker and Date Decision Taken:

Director of Children's Services on 18 October 2024 in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Children's Services and having briefed the Shadow Cabinet Member for Children's Services.

Summary of Matter or Issue Requiring Decision:

Nationally Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP) are rising at a rate of 11%, last year the rate of increase in Torbay was 5%. Over the course of the last six months Torbay Council have been reviewing the needs of young people across Torbay. Forecast data from the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment shows us that hearing impairment needs across Torbay have fallen, with this need representing less than 1% of all special educational needs in the Bay, with those higher-level hearing impairment needs being less than ten families in total across the primary and secondary age ranges.

In February 2024, a Special Education Needs and Disability (SEND) Needs Analysis was carried out for children who had an EHCP or who received Special Educational Need Support at their school. For those with a hearing impairment as their primary area of need and in receipt of an EHCP, this equates to 0.7% of the total EHCPs, it is acknowledged that when a child requires support due to a hearing impairment that this is often highly complex but low incidence. When comparing this to those with a Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) need, this is at 25% of the total EHCPs.

The Hearing Impairment Units have been running at less than 50% capacity for more than five years. The closure of the Hearing Impairment Units at St Margarets Academy and Spires College will affect a very small number of Torbay children as well as a similar number who reside within the Devon County Council area. There will be no loss of support for children as a result of this decision. Children's needs as set out in their EHCP will continue to be met.

All the needs of the Torbay pupils affected by the decision will continue to be met through funding which goes directly to the school to ensure the specialist teaching and support required in the EHCP is delivered. The Council expects both schools will continue to utilise the extremely dedicated and knowledgeable staff expertise from the units to deliver the support within the school. This support will be delivered in each young person's classroom. They will continue to receive the specialist interventions they need from a Teacher of the Deaf and other specialist staff. Individual grants will be made available for any specialist equipment needed.

Furthermore, community events previously run for both the young people and their families will continue through our popular Family Hubs. This will mean that even more children and young people with hearing needs (including those who have not met the criteria for a place in a unit previously) can be included in these events.

Decision Taken:

That the Hearing Impairment Units at St Margarets Academy and Spires College close from September 2025.

Summary of Reason(s) for Decision Taken:

By delivering support for those with a hearing impairment in a different way we will be able to repurpose the 16 special school places to children and young people who are on the waiting list to receive support.

Torbay's Safety Valve agreement caps special school spaces. By taking this decision, the five children affected by the change can still have their needs met but an additional 16 young people can now have a special school place who could not previously. This will also save on the empty spaces (which have been left unfilled for the previous five years) and which we still need to resource financially with base funding.

In July 2024 both schools were consulted on this decision. One school had already approached the Local Authority as they were unable to sustain the financial costs of the unit (which were being supplemented by schools funds). Three parents have approached the Local Authority for more clarity and meetings with two parents have been held to offer guidance and reassurance that the support will still be available.

For Devon children the Head of SEND at Devon County Council was also consulted during the summer term and again in September 2024. Colleagues from Devon SEND have collaborated with Torbay to co-create communications for the Devon families affected. The Devon SEND team are formulating plans to ensure the Devon children's needs can be met in a similar way. They have allocated an officer from the SEND team to make contact with Devon parents and provide guidance about how support can be delivered in the future.

Summary of Alternatives or Options considered and rejected and Background Papers:

An alternative option would be to offer a hearing impairment outreach service, however this provision was already available and therefore discounted.

A further alternative option would have been to do nothing. The Hearing Impairment Units have been running at less than 50% capacity for more than five years. The repurposing of the support would enable resources to be targeted more effectively.

Details of any conflict of interest and dispensation granted to the Officer taking the decision or by any Member of the Council in delegating responsibility for any specific express delegation:

None

Implementation:

Steps to implement this decision will be taken over the coming months to ensure that the units are closed by September 2025.

A copy of this decision and any supporting documentation considered by the Officer taking this decision may also be available for inspection by the public at the Council's offices or posted upon payment of any copying and postage charges. Any member of the public wishing to take up either of these options is asked to please ring (01803) 207087 or email governance.support@torbay.gov.uk

Signed: _____ Date: _____
(Director of Children's Services)