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**James McNeillie HMI**  
Regional Director

Ms Nancy Meehan, Director of Children's Services  
Torbay Council

Sent via email: [nancy.meehan@torbay.gov.uk](mailto:nancy.meehan@torbay.gov.uk)

Dear Nancy,

Thank you for meeting with me, Dominic Stevens, Senior HMI, Social Care and Simon Rowe Senior HMI, Schools on 29 May 2024. Please extend our thanks to your team for their valuable contributions. Apologies for the delay in getting this letter to you.

## **Social Care**

While there are clearly numbers of ongoing and emerging challenges and areas of practice that you want to strengthen, it felt like our conversation mirrored the very 'can do' and future-focussed, but honest, clear and evidence-based character of your self-assessment. We also, of course, touched on the achievements and particular areas of good practice, of which you and your colleagues are rightly proud. With both ILACS and SEND inspections in early 2022 and a 'front door' JTAI only just over six months ago I feel that we had a good body of evidence against which to compare your self-assessment as a marker of progress.

We began our conversation looking at the bigger whole council picture. Anne-Marie Bond, Chief Executive, told us how as a result of your LGA corporate challenge, you had received feedback that you are, 'a radically different council than when they last did a corporate peer challenge. You attributed this to the relational and trauma-informed approach now becoming a whole council approach. You outlined how this goes hand in hand with strong corporate and political support for children's services. For example, you said that although Torbay is a 'no overall control' council, there is no 'political point scoring' at the expense of children's services and there is a financial commitment to children. Like most councils you are under financial pressure but despite a £1 million overspend in 2023-24 you are under no pressure to make cuts and have benefitted from both a £3 million uplift and a three-year financial planning window. You have made some efficiencies, but money from this has been redirected back into services. Sufficiency of homes for children in care, wider housing pressures and ensuring the future viability of your early help hubs are your key financial pressures and three of your key priorities. Alongside this you are also focussed on the

impact of poverty and the cost of living on families, children missing education (for a variety of reasons) and ensuring that you have a workforce that is sufficient in number, experience and skills to meet the needs of your children.

You are proud of the work of the three physical, and one virtual, family hubs, and they remain central to your future plans for early help, in line with 'Stable Homes Built on Love'. You are confident that early help is now stronger and on a positive trajectory and feel that this was validated by a Spring 2023 LGA Early Help Peer Challenge, which also gave you some helpful recommendations for how to further strengthen services. You now have a higher percentage of initial contacts going through to early help and have further tightened up the 'step-down' process from CIN to early help to ensure that families receive joined up support. You are confident that your MASH is identifying risk appropriately and is helping to ensure that children receive further assessment and services in a timescale that meets their needs. You were pleased with the positive feedback from the recent 'front door' JTAI. That said, both from the JTAI and your own performance and quality management, you are concerned about the high rate of re-referrals. You have work ongoing to better understand and tackle this issue, which is particularly the case for children suffering from chronic neglect or domestic abuse and for adolescents (especially girls for who there are concerns about their mental wellbeing and about extra-familial harm). Whilst maintaining a strong focus on early help, in line with 'Stable Homes Built on Love', you have been more cautious in how early help and child in need work fit together. Whilst you are working to better align them and to ensure a progressively more seamless transition from one to the other for children, you have not fully merged these categories of work with families. You have adopted this more staged approach because you want to provide clarity for referring professionals and because you want to be assured that children are consistently getting the level of services and degree of social work assessment and oversight that matches their level and complexity of need.

The areas for improvement and priority action highlighted within the JTAI provided you with a helpful focus in discussions with some partner agencies, notably health and the police, although it is still relatively early days in terms of that post inspection planning. You shared with us that although some police colleagues who you felt were child centred have moved on the partnership is achieving progress in more joined up working. Linked to this you highlighted to us some of the ongoing work to further strengthen your approach to tackling extra-familial harm, an area that was highlighted at the JTAI as much improved. This has centred on improving the access of the exploitation team, and relevant others to up to date and relevant performance data to support practice.

As for most, if not all, local authorities in England, ensuring that you have a sufficient breadth and depth of suitable, and mostly local, homes for children in care is a challenge. The availability and cost of housing in Torbay puts an additional pressure on this, as it does for staffing. Within these constraints you continue to work to strengthen your support to these children and to improve their outcomes. There are some key areas of progress but also areas in which you acknowledge that you need to continue to focus your attention. With appropriate oversight and 'checks and balances' in place you have, over time, reduced

the number of children who need to be in care. This has been achieved through meeting needs earlier and so diverting children from the need to come into care, managed returns home, foster to adopt, and moving to other legal arrangements such as special guardianship. Based on a belief that most children do better in families, you have moved to a situation in which far fewer of your children in care are in residential care (16 at present). However, the short-term placement stability of children is not where you want it to be, many children are not receiving initial and annual health checks and dental checks in a timely manner (an area you are very actively working with health agencies on) and you currently have six children living in unregistered children's homes. You have arrangements in place to help ensure regular, strong oversight of these children in place and robust planning to move them to appropriate registered homes as soon as possible, but their situations are a measure of the challenges that exist in meeting the needs of children with particularly complex needs. Eight of your children in care are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. With the government's 0.1% figure working out as 25 children, you are expecting to welcome more asylum-seeking children to Torbay.

You have 21 care leavers who were formerly unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and so these make up a sizeable cohort with your overall care leaver population. You allocate PAs to children in care earlier than many local authorities and this gives them the opportunity to build a relationship and plan for independence in a gradual and incremental way. Accommodation for care leavers remains a challenge, with about a quarter not living in suitable accommodation. You are taking steps on a number of fronts to improve this, including through close working with housing to enhance the options and availability of housing for care leavers and through continued promotion of staying put options. You have invited Mark Riddell back again, after his 2022 visit, to look at progress and to make further recommendations.

The social work vacancy rate has steadily reduced year-on-year and is now in line with the national average at just over 15%. This is positive and says something about your continually improving ability to retain staff. You have a number of measures in place to help ensure that staff are listened to and can help to shape services and that they are equipped with the practice knowledge, skills and tools they need. These are well outlined in your SEF but include your Learning Academy, regular 'listening circles' for staff and your co-produced 'Ways of working' practice standards. You are however aware that average caseloads have crept up from high teens to 20 at the time of the JTAI, to low twenties now and you are continuing to monitor this. As well as listening to your workforce you were also keen to stress the measures you have taken, particularly over the last 12 months, to enhance the voices of children, young people and their families, both in the individual care they receive and in shaping service delivery more widely. This has included the launch of your Children and Young People's Panel, the re-launch of your Children in Care Council and the now mandatory seeking of feedback from children and families for the completion of full audits.

## **Focus on alternative provision (AP)**

We discussed your commissioning arrangements for alternative provision. Unregistered provision is commissioned by different teams within the local authority. You state that all have their own processes to commission places for pupils. You are moving to a model where the information your teams hold is being held in one place. Placement sufficiency is now the responsibility of one manager, and there will be one contract in place for each pupil. You aim to ensure a more consistent approach to the commissioning of places going forward.

Your own local authority alternative provision has capacity for around 50 pupils. This is currently used predominantly for 6<sup>th</sup> day provision. You are looking to extend this service to conduct more outreach work. The intention is to be able to meet the needs of pupils at an earlier stage. Rightly, you recognise that understanding a pupil's needs and putting in early support will alleviate some of the pressures for the alternative provision of having to react to urgent, immediate work.

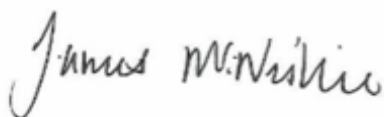
The quality assurance of alternative provision in the local authority has a focus on pupils' safety and attendance. Alternative providers produce a weekly report which includes pupils' attendance Reports on alternative providers and pupil placements are shared at your headteacher forums. This helps you, along with your key stakeholders, to have oversight of each pupil and their engagement with placements.

You state that there are a growing number of pupils accessing alternative provision and an increasing number of pupils who are on the waiting list. It is encouraging to hear that your education inclusion board now includes chief executive officers from multi-academy trusts. You are keen to use this forum to discuss and debate how you can work together effectively to ensure pupils' needs are met particularly back in their home schools. You also hope this may help some schools to be more willing to re-integrate pupils back from alternative provision when they are ready to return.

When Ofsted inspects a school, it telephones or visits a sample of alternative providers that school is using. You told us that some alternative providers feel uneasy about the prospect of these conversations/visits. We offered to speak to groups of alternative providers if that would be helpful.

Thanks to you and your colleagues for the time spent preparing and for their contributions to this useful meeting.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "James McNeillie".

**James McNeillie HMI**  
**Regional Director, South West, Ofsted**