

Torbay Children's Continuous Improvement Board

Progress Report to the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Sub-Board

11 November 2024

Introduction and Background

Torbay has had an Improvement Board in place since Ofsted placed the Children's Service in formal intervention (often referred to as being in special measures) following its inspections of 2016 and 2018 which judged services to be inadequate overall. Members may recall that Ofsted then conducted a series of monitoring visits on behalf of the Secretary of State to monitor progress against our plan before conducting a further full inspection. This second inspection conducted in March and April 2022 found that the service had made exceptional progress and was judged to be 'good' overall, an award that is highly unusual in that it by passed the more usual 'requires improvement' judgement.

The Service and the Council was understandably proud of its progress and its determination to continue its improvement journey found expression in the Improvement Board being renamed as the Torbay Children's Continuous Improvement Board. The slight change caused by the addition of the word 'continuous' was not simply a semantic amendment. It reflected a determination to reassert its adoption of a commitment to never stop looking for opportunities to improve, an essential driver if the Council is to achieve its ultimate ambition of becoming an outstanding children's service authority.

The drive to improve has continued unabated since and a number of measures are in place to support best operational and management practice. This report charts this activity, describes some strengths and key areas for development, the strategies in place to ensure that progress is supported and the further organizational change that is planned to equip the Board to go forward confidently in partnership with other Boards that have responsibilities for children.

Strengths

When Ofsted carried out its 2018 inspection it disparagingly fed back that children's services were unable to spell the word **exploitation** let alone offer services to affected children that were effective. Since then, services have been transformed by the success of a small team who have worked tirelessly with partners to develop an excellent policy framework and a range of practice tools that have been drawn from best national management and practice. Its skilful adaptation to the Torbay context and insightful training and development activity has meant that almost all social care practitioners are attuned to the possibility that exploitation may exist for all children and increasingly partner agencies are also embracing the concepts. This is illustrated by the numbers of completed exploitation/vulnerability assessments which have virtually doubled over the last four years (144 to 287). In the same period the number of assessments that have been graded red (reflecting high risk) has almost trebled in number (23 to 65). This reflects increased practitioner knowledge and confidence over the period under consideration.

There is more to be done, particularly in relation to disruption activity when perpetrators of exploitative activity are identified. Reviews of outcomes of assessments also need to be

undertaken with more rigour and although this is an area for development, it is in part mitigated by the knowledge that audits show that exploitation was actively considered in 83% of assessments, 83% of children's plans and in 94% of management oversight and supervision sessions.

Work to support the youth of Torbay has developed across the partnership and is now beginning to be seen as a real strength of the Children's Service. There is clear evidence of partnership priorities being aligned in efforts to affect good outcomes for young people. For example, the **Youth Justice Service** has experienced recent and significant rise in the number of first-time entrants. Although the numbers of young people are comparatively relatively small, their behaviours in a relatively confined geographical area had significant impact on the security of the community concerned where moped thefts became a cause of significant concern on at least three levels: concern for the victims, concern for the perpetrators and concern that forces of exploitation were at work. The community wide initiative to manage the problem reflected positively the multi-disciplinary approach that had been adopted to reduce the incidence and impact of the offending behaviour. The most recent Youth Justice data suggests that first time entrant numbers are reducing and are approximate to local comparators and below national averages.

Torbay Children's Service adopted a **restorative, strengths-based approach** as its preferred model of intervention with families shortly after it commenced its 'improvement journey'. All staff were trained by nationally renowned experts in the model to supersede a number of different methods of intervention that had been in use in the previous period. This was a conscious development designed to ensure the identity of the service and enable those who use the service to benefit from a workforce that offers a consistent approach, negating the most common complaint of children and their families that they often had to retell 'their stories' without any certainty that the new worker would be able to seamlessly work with them in the same way as their predecessor.

The approach has been successful with some clear evidence that child and family strengths are used to shape the work with the voices of children, their parents and carers more often evident. The recently adopted audit model seeks the views of parents, and the early but consistent evidence is that parents are reporting better and more inclusive relationships with Children's Services. This positive finding builds upon a much more personalised approach to communicating with children. For example, reports and case records and reviews are now much more likely to be written directly to the child with the adoption of the 'language that cares' writing style endorsing a personalised and sensitive approach to communication.

Again, there is no complacency that further improvements can be made. Although audit and 'deep dive' activity shows clear evidence to support the view that social care staff know their children well (a finding endorsed by Ofsted), they are sometimes professionally let down by not consistently recording their interactions. This is relevant to direct work sessions as well as more regular contact and improvement in this area is now a priority for the service. Despite these issues, Torbay has become the first local authority area in the country to have its children's service recognized as an accredited restorative authority, an accolade of some significance. It should also be noted that the Council as a whole is now striving to be a restorative Local Authority.

Areas for further Development

Children and young people across Torbay experience too many **suspensions and exclusions from school, reduced hours due to being subject to a part time timetable and, in some cases, inadequate education in an elective home education** environment that have increased in number over the last four years. Worryingly, Torbay currently ranks 146/151 in the 'local authority league table' for suspensions and exclusions which is a cause of major concern.

There is no doubt that some children present significant challenges to the school system, but it is disappointing and a concern to see too many having interrupted educational experiences. The correlation between school absence in whatever form and later life lack of ambition, neglect and involvement in youth crime is acknowledged in research and in professional experience. The data speaks to an urgent need to develop different ways of working to prevent the necessity for such life affecting intervention.

The challenge to positively affecting the high numbers is complex and most recently has not been assisted by a lack of willingness of school leaders and trusts to engage in more collaborative approaches to managing the young people concerned. This is an issue which has been raised at the Children's Continuous Improvement Board and has been escalated further. Meanwhile however, work has begun on developing a 'Cluster Based Model' that will draw together school system leaders, early help and social care workers, and other relevant professionals to work in a more collaborative and integrated way to identify and work with young people at risk of disrupted education at the earliest stages. The Cluster Model is in consultation at the time of drafting this document but there is quiet confidence that it will be approved thus enabling a new and more integrated approach to school disruption to be adopted.

Children's Service performance data has been a major area of development work throughout the improvement journey. The Liquid Logic system now in place is an effective resource enabling scrutiny of contemporary performance data and bespoke enquiry when required. It provides a solid foundation for both individual case management and strategic oversight of the service. It is an accurate representation to say that the system is relied upon for 'health checking' the children's service in the absence of the reliable and systematic provision of relevant data from partner agencies. **Child Protection data** is a continuous priority for managers and practitioners because of its high importance to the safety and well-being of children. Historically, Torbay's child protection figures reflected the fact that too many children were made subject to child protection plans when safe alternatives were available, such as well-developed children in need plans. The first stage of the improvement journey worked hard to address the issues and highly encouraging improvement was secured which endured for a considerable period of time with Torbay figures of children plans being closely aligned with our comparator local authority areas (134). In late 2023 this good work began to unravel, and data scrutiny showed graphically that the numbers of children proceeding to child protection investigation and enquiry (section 47) and then to becoming subject to child protection plans was increasing at a concerning and unsustainable rate. In response, a detailed 'deep dive' exercise was undertaken (March 2024) which identified key issues leading to the performance decline which included poor decision making and poor multi-agency attendance at key meetings such as strategy discussions and initial child protection conferences. When these attendance issues were present, we noted a significantly increased likelihood of the child becoming subject to a plan. Restorative action was taken to tackle the issues which quickly reversed the decline and currently 162 children are subject to a plan which is a reduction from a

figure well in excess of 200 children. Emphasising the importance of 'safe reduction', the service directorate is confident that the current downward trend means that we are continuing to converge with the rates of plans held in our comparator authorities and national averages.

Similar exercises have taken place which has brought into sharp relief the challenges in securing the **recording of children's assessments and plans on case records**. Though confident that at least some elements of the relevant work is completed, there is deep concern that without effective practice and management in this area children's needs will not be fully understood and plans will not be consequently appropriately focused. The resultant management action which has prioritised work in these areas has resulted in a significant turnaround in performance which is overseen by senior leaders on a daily basis reflecting the seriousness with which the problem is viewed. Again, data analysis suggests that the service is on course to attain the high standards that has over recent times been consistently achieved.

These management led interventions heralded a revised approach to data oversight which now requires an immediate 'deep dive' scrutiny of any part of the service where data shows a decline in performance over two consecutive, monthly reporting cycles. This approach is supportive of those involved in service delivery and is intended to generate solutions, which so far appears to have been welcomed by front line services.

The use of bespoke 'deep dive' exercises sits alongside other analytical and assurance functions such as audit, a programme of 'Mock Ofsted's' and the 6 weekly Chief Executive and CCIB Chair deep dive exercises. Though different in nature and scope, the menu of Quality Assurance activity offers the ability to systematically review elements of service provision. Importantly, Councillors through the representation of the Leader, the Cabinet Member for Children and the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Children's Sub-Group are conversant with the range of activity and the findings, conclusions and recommendations through their membership of CCIB.

Such activity continues to be programmed on a frequent basis and there is clear evidence of impact on what have previous been long standing and challenging issues that have directly affected the lives of children and young people. For example, **housing provision and homelessness among care experienced young people** has been a constant challenge which has drawn the attention of colleague politicians and the CCIB. Following a Chief Executive and CCIB Chair 'deep dive' and its subsequent presentation to the Board, formal representations were made at a strategic level to stimulate closer working relationships between Social Care services and Housing Options. Embracing a shared target to agree action to reduce the risk of homelessness, significant progress has been made and as of 12 November, no care experienced young people were 'rough sleeping', 94% were deemed to be living in suitable accommodation with the remainder in temporary arrangements whilst awaiting suitable alternatives. Young people have also benefited from two very positive actions taken by housing. Care Experienced young people are now automatically accepted on waiting lists with a Band B status backdated to their 16th Birthday which accelerates their opportunities to bid for accommodation. There has also been a new commitment to intervene with support in circumstances where a young person is likely to be deemed to be 'intentionally homeless' which has significant implications for their futures. This initiative has also been effective with most young people now avoiding this adverse measure.

These changed approaches represent good progress from a challenging starting point but again there is full recognition of the challenges that remain, particularly around sufficiency of

accommodation, the effectiveness of and compliance with existing housing provider contracts and the challenges for the Council in balancing a commitment to supporting young people with housing as a part of the Child Friendly Torbay ambition with other demands impacting upon planning responsibilities. Each of these issues is understood and the services are continuing to seek opportunities to secure further progress despite some of the barriers to progress which are beyond their ability to affect.

Conclusion

This year has been characterised by a Children's Service that is determined to progress with plans to support children being linked to their identified needs. The CCIB has continued to have oversight and has adopted or oversee a number of assurance measures designed to understand the experiences of children and young people and to take action where circumstances dictate.

Logically as time progresses the focus has increasingly been on the roles played by children social care colleagues in collaboration with partners (such as the work on the housing agenda for young people set out above), and increasing upon the roles fulfilled by children's focused partnership boards (such as that relating to the Youth Justice Service) as they seek to improve the experiences of children and young people. This means that the CCIB is at an interesting stage of transformation where it is seeking to become a strategic board shaping, overseeing scrutinising and challenging the work of partner boards while also playing a key role in removing barriers to progress, applying the skills and experience of Board members to support innovative responses to challenges, and to stimulate responses to new trends or policy requirements. In short, and if approved, the new-look CCIB will play a central role in the constellation of services available to support the furtherance of improved services for children and young people in the Council-wide drive to become an outstanding children's service in Child Friendly Torbay.

The CCIB will retain its role in directly evaluating service quality through the Chief Executive and CCIB Chair's programme of deep dives which are increasing cross partnership in nature, but it will also continue to receive other forms of assurance such as the outcomes of audits, bespoke 'in service' deep dive (such as that undertaken in response to child protection concerns), and 'Mock Ofsted' exercises. Outcomes of these initiatives will continue to be reported to CCIB and by means of attendance, Councillors will have immediate and direct access to the reports, their findings and recommendations. It seems logical to suggest that children and young people could derive benefit from the enquiry activity of the Children's Overview and Scrutiny Sub-Board being more closely aligned with the assurance work of the CCIB so that maximum impact could be achieved from this focused work.

Recommendations

1. That the contents of this report be noted
2. That work is undertaken to align the enquiry activity of the Children's Overview and Scrutiny Sub-Board to the assurance function of the Torbay Children's Continuous Improvement Board.

Stephen Hart

Independent Chair

Torbay Children's Continuous Improvement Board