

Meeting: Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Sub-Board

Date: 18 December 2023

Wards affected: All

Report Title: Progress Report on the Implementation of the Children's Service Continuous Improvement Plan 2022/25

Report Author: Stephen Hart, Independent Chair, Children's Service Continuous Improvement Board

When does the decision need to be implemented? Report to be noted and the timescales for improvement to be accepted.

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1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 This report summarises the progress that has been made in implementing the Children's Continuous Improvement Plan 2022/25. It also details how the plan is monitored and how strengths and areas for further development are identified.

2. Reason for Proposal and its benefits

- 2.1 The Council is united in wanting Torbay to be a place where we have turned the tide on poverty and tackled inequalities; where our children and older people will have high aspirations and where there are quality jobs, good pay and affordable housing for our residents. This Continuous Improvement Plan plays a key role in delivering those aspirations for the area's children, young people and their families by sustaining a focus on those areas of service which if delivered to a consistently good or better standard will improve their lived experiences. It is the first iteration of a plan that reflects the Ofsted inspection judgement of October 2022 which determined that Torbay Children's Service had progressed to 'Good' overall having previously been judged to be 'Inadequate'. This plan reflects the service's and Council belief that we should aspire to become an 'Outstanding' service and over its three year life we believe we shall address the requirements for achieving our ambition.
- 2.2 It is recognized that the complexity and wide-ranging nature of the plan means that progress will not be uniform. Some elements of the plan will progress more quickly than others, and some elements are dependent on others being well advanced before work in earnest can begin. These inter-dependencies are recognized in the timescales allocated to each element of the plan.
- 2.3 We are also acutely conscious that any plan can be affected by variables beyond our control such as new Government initiatives or unpredicted local events that must be addressed. We believe that the plan and our internal monitoring arrangements are sufficiently robust to accommodate these challenges. This is best exemplified by reference to the development of family hubs to support our commitment to multi-disciplinary and local service development so that families can access the services they need close to their homes at the time that they need them without unnecessary recourse to statutory services. Members of this committee will recall that Torbay has been selected by central Government as a 'pathfinder authority' for this development in recognition of its current standard of work and service development, and the confidence that it has in Torbay as a Children's Service area that can help others benefit from its experiences and expertise.

3. Recommendation(s) / Proposed Decision

1. That the report be noted.
2. That the Committee endorses the plan.

Background Documents

The Children's Service Continuous Improvement Plan 2022/25

1. Introduction

1.1 This Children's Continuous Improvement Plan comprises improvement priorities that are essential for the success of our ambition to become outstanding. It is complimented by the Councils Transformation Programme and our Sufficiency Strategy which quite properly focusses attention on the resources required for a successful children's service modelled in line with the detail of our vision for a child friendly Torbay. It contains our ambitious agenda for further improvement with priorities focused upon the needs of older young people in the process of transitioning to adult services, those at risk of youth homelessness and those vulnerable to exploitation and, potentially, offending behaviour. In addition, we are concerned to support young people with their health and, importantly we are seeking through this plan to stimulate the development of a revitalised and retargeted child and adolescent mental health service.

1.2 The previous iterations of the improvement plan very usefully set out its improvement priorities under 4 thematic pillars. We have chosen to follow a similar structure in the Continuous Improvement Plan but to reflect the partnership dimension of this continuous improvement plan we have introduced a 5th thematic pillar 'Robust Partnership Practice'. We have also extended the leadership, management and governance pillar to reflect the move towards a more joined up cross partnership approach to delivering children's services.

- Partnership, Leadership and Management
- A robust model of social work practice
- Robust partnership practice
- A sufficient and skilled workforce
- Quality assurance and audit.

1.3 Any plan of such magnitude and complexity requires a range of mechanisms to monitor progress to provide assurance that it is timely, meeting needs, securing 'traction' so that services that are delivered are of sufficient quality and flexible enough to be modified to reflect understanding of the needs of children, young people and their families. Torbay has adopted a four-strand approach which evaluates quantitative and qualitative material and data:

- Scrutiny of highlight and exception reports at the Children's Continuous Improvement Board (CCIB).
- Presentation to the CCIB and 'critical friend' challenge to reports by 'partner' Boards (such as Torbay's Safeguarding Children Partnership Board) who have priorities for provision of services for children, young people and families.

- Monthly, systematic 'Deep Dive' exercises carried out by the CCIB Chair and the Chief Executive which evaluates progress on specific areas of work.
- Periodic audit activities (including single and multi-agency audits, and dip samples) which focus on work with individual children and young people to capture how the services they have received have affected their lived experiences.

1.4 The following bullet points represent a synopsis of our current strengths and areas for improvement that have been identified by our monitoring and evaluating activities. For ease of reading and to reflect the structure of the Continuous Improvement Plan the findings are set out against the pillars of the plan. It will be quickly noted that pillars 2 and 3 have attracted most comment. This is to be expected as they are the largest areas of improvement and there is nothing to be read into the number of comments.

Strengths

- **Pillar 1**
 - Council political oversight through Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny will evaluate the effectiveness of the partnership in delivering high quality services to children.
 - Following submission of an application to be considered as part of UNICEF's 'Child Friendly Communities', it is positive that Torbay has been accepted.
- **Pillar 2**
 - Torbay has been accredited as a Children's Restorative Organisation.
 - Consistently identify risk for children.
 - The IRO Service has been enhanced by appointing a Service Manager who has taken the lead on improving children's participation.
 - Practice standards (Ways of Working) have been revised, in line with the restorative model, and are clear about prescribed timescales.
 - Torbay has safely reduced the numbers of cared for children and continues on a downward trajectory, with significant year-on-year reductions since 2018-19.
 - Our audit activity evidences that for those children who need care, this is the right decision for them. Our adoption scorecard performance highlights the positive work being undertaken to achieve permanence.
 - The permanence Panel ensures that appropriate support is in place to ensure the plan of reunification is safe and effective, and that timely decisions are made in terms of presentation to Legal Gateway Panel with a view to entering into proceedings and seeking to discharge the Care Order.
 - Fostering families are supported politically by their attendance at the Fostering Forum,
- **Pillar 3**
 - Family hubs and partner agencies and groups provide a seamless early intervention and prevention offer which ensures children and their families have the right support at the earliest opportunity.
 - We are increasing the number of key workers who will support children and young people at an earlier stage of need and will not require a diagnostic process to have completed in order to access specialist neurodiversity provision.
 - Torbay has an effective exploitation toolkit which is embedded and used by professionals across the Torbay Children's Safeguarding Children Partnership.

- All care experienced young people who are experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness, from the ages of 18-25, are also tracked through the Youth Homelessness Prevention Panel.
- The Corporate Parenting Board has strand leads to champion areas of priority, with a dedicated lead for Housing.
- **Pillar 4**
 - Succession planning for Senior Leadership is complete. The Divisional Director group and all but one Head of Service are now permanent. The Service Managers roles are all permanently filled.
 - Leadership and Development workshops have been delivered to all Advanced Social Workers and Team Managers since the winter of 2022.
- **Pillar 5**
 - Deep Dive actions are tracked and updated monthly via Children's Social Care Senior Leadership Team and monitored via Quartet.
 - A consistent and robust monitoring process remains in place in relation to performance.
 - The service now has access to a wide range of PowerBI data dashboards, which allows for live and up to date data analysis within each service.

Areas for Development.

- **Pillar 1**
 - Multi-disciplinary partnership arrangements need to be maintained by a shared focus, agreed collaborative arrangements and clear statements of accountability.
- **Pillar 2**
 - Continue to maintain a focus on management oversight and supervision as part of the quality assurance.
 - Need for robust triangulation of information, more considered analysis of historical information as an indicator of the present and the future, strengthen the use of tools in assessment and promote the need for robust and timely updates of assessments relating to cared for children.
 - Achieve consistency for children in relation to their Child Protection chairperson.
 - Increase awareness of private fostering.
 - Embed FGC in Pre-Proceedings process.
 - Reduce reliance on unregistered and unregulated placements.
 - Reduce the numbers of cared for children living at home with parents.
- **Pillar 3**
 - The s75 finance arrangement, including the service specification for the Therapeutic Wellbeing Service, is currently under review as it has not been effective.
 - Identified development work to be completed with our Child Protection Conference Chairs/IROs, and we are in the process of identifying Practice Leads for training and supporting others to embrace the theories and principles of Contextual Safeguarding.
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- The most significant challenge remains access for care experienced young people to move on accommodation, generic housing stock as opposed to specialist accommodation.
- Temporary Accommodation and Youth Homelessness is on the corporate risk register for scrutiny, commitment and oversight.
- **Pillar 4**
 - Continue to focus on staff retention, minimise reliance on agency staff and ensure effective recruitment practices.
- **Pillar 5**
 - Ensure that QA activities are appropriately focused upon qualitative as well as quantitative data and that the workforce is sufficiently skilled to identify impacts and outcomes for all children and young people.

1.5 As can be seen from the above we have been able to make some good progress in a number of areas and given the challenges that Torbay is facing, this is welcome and reassuring. The confidential headline feedback we received from inspectors following the recent JTAI inspection has largely endorsed our level of self-awareness and understanding, and we shall use the published report that is due in the early New Year to re-enforce our plan if there is need to do so. However, there is no room for complacency within the service and across the partnership and we wish to push ahead with rigour to ensure that all of those areas where we have identified areas for improvement and development receive the necessary support and opportunity to make progress. We will focus hard on our continuous improvement agenda but in parallel we shall strengthen our partnership arrangements which have been significantly affected by personnel changes and the associated discontinuity that such disruption generates. This work will commence with a Chief Executive led summit meeting of her peers and chief officers in our partnership arrangements. We shall also continue to strengthen our audit and performance evaluative capability in the realisation that an understanding of children and young people's lived experiences has to be fully secured if we are to achieve the level of improvement we have set ourselves. This work has already started in Children's Services, and we shall seek to ensure our multi-agency and multi-disciplinary approaches keep pace. Finally, work on assuring the quality of social work practice never stops but in light of the developments above, we are at an opportune moment to reflect on our standard expectations and endorse or amend them in light of our knowledge and ensure that our front-line managers are properly equipped to deliver to the highest possible standard. Again, work on this element of our plan has started and will begin in earnest with a management meeting which is scheduled for January 2024 and followed by a whole staff meeting.

2. Options under consideration

See section 1 above

3. Financial Opportunities and Implications

- 3.1 All service developments in the Continuous Improvement Plan have been costed and are monitored through normal arrangements. When required, partnership funding is agreed using the relevant legislative framework and monitored through the associated procurement and commissioning arrangements.

4. Legal Implications

- 4.1 All elements of the plan are consistent with the relevant legislation.

5. Engagement and Consultation

- 5.1 Engagement with partner agencies and internal colleagues has been extensive and is an ongoing feature of any 'improvement journey'. In addition and crucially, the voices of children, young people and their families are increasingly directly involved in service development and delivery, for example in the creation of Family Hubs, SEND services and Cared For and Care Experienced services.

6. Purchasing or Hiring of Goods and/or Services

N/A

7. Tackling Climate Change

N/A

8. Associated Risks

- 8.1 The Continuous Improvement Plan itself is a tool which once implemented is designed to mitigate the risks to children and young people and risks to the reputation of Torbay Council of having a service that fails to meet the minimum good standards that are required by our regulators. Our monitoring and quality assurance structures will ensure that progress is appropriately maintained.

9. Equality Impacts - Identify the potential positive and negative impacts on specific groups

- 9.1 Equality impacts which do impact differently in different parts of this Improvement Plan have been built into each pillar.

10. Cumulative Council Impact

N/A

11. Cumulative Community Impacts

None.