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**Stephen Lee HMI**  
Assistant Regional Director

Nancy Meehan  
Director of Children's Services  
Sent via email to: [nancy.meehan@torbay.gov.uk](mailto:nancy.meehan@torbay.gov.uk),

Dear Nancy

### **Re: Area SEND engagement meeting 27 February 2024**

The purpose of the meeting was to discuss SEND provision in your area and how the area partnership is meeting the needs of children and young people with SEND, how you are improving services for children and young people with SEND and their families, to identify any issues of concern and how the partnership is keeping up to date with any changes in the local SEND system.

You told us that services for children are at the top of the council's list of priorities. The previous Area SEND inspection in November 2021 found that change was needed in many areas of provision for children and young people (CYP) with SEND. You acknowledge that you are not seeing the impact of your development work as fast as you would wish. However, the partnership is determined to explore different options for improving services. For example the consideration of an independent chair to the SEND strategic board. You believe this independent oversight will accelerate development work.

The relationship between the different organisations in the local area partnership is critical to its success. You acknowledge that in the past there have been weaknesses in joint working in your area. In November 2021, for example, you said that provision for children with SEND was seen as a separate area of work from social care. You believe that there is now a much greater commitment to partnership work from leaders in each aspect of education, health and social care. Two weeks ago, a new chief executive officer of the ICB was appointed. You say that this will also help to accelerate development work.

You are proud of the work of the parent/carer group, 'SEND Family Voice Torbay'. Leaders of this group say they have been included much more in strategic decisions. As a result, you believe the partnership has a better understanding of the impact of its work on children and families.

You explained that there has been an increased commitment to services for children and young people (CYP) with SEND from the council since the previous joint Ofsted and CQC inspection. This has resulted in greater capacity in SEND services. For example, the partnership plans to strengthen the work of family hubs by collocating educational psychologists within them. You have also included educational psychologists in the recently established 'first step' groups to look at the needs of children in the early years and their families. You say that you want to build strong foundations for the future and so you are moving slowly with these initiatives to make sure they are sustainable.

A quality framework was introduced last year to drive up the quality of education, health and care (EHC) plans. You believe this has improved the quality of these plans, but you say that this focus on quality means that the impact on the timeliness of plans has been limited. Parents in particular report that there are still long delays in finalising new EHC plans.

There is a tension between quality and timeliness of EHC plans. At the start of last year there was a backlog in Torbay of 723 plans that were more than 13 months overdue for review. You brought in more people and adopted a project approach to successfully clear this backlog. You describe this as a reset. Resources can now be targeted at completing assessments and producing EHC plans within the desired timeframe. A new information management system has helped to identify the progress being made.

Even so, you acknowledge that the partnership needs to do more work to ensure that children's health needs are appropriately incorporated into their EHC plans. To this end, you have instigated a pilot project in Torbay. You are using a designated clinical officer to train clinicians in the area to understand more about the EHC plans. You believe this is resulting in greater consistency of practice.

One of the initiatives you have introduced is a change to the way your family hubs work. Each of the five hubs now has an outreach worker attached. You say that these outreach workers are now better able to go into the family home. This is proving to be a popular and effective approach. Demand is such that there is now a waiting list for this service. Outreach work is now being directed by your 'at risk' panel. You say that the level of intervention for children with social, emotional and mental health needs and children who need speech and language therapy is increasing because of this. The effect of this intervention is yet to be evaluated fully. You hope that it will soon start to have an impact on the high rate of school suspensions and permanent exclusions in the Torbay area.

The partnership has developed a 'graduated response roadshow' which has now visited all schools in Torbay. You believe that this has significantly raised the profile of the partnership's work with schools. One outcome of this is the increased attendance of school staff at the regular SENCO network meetings. Parent representatives are sensing the higher profile of local SEND services. They report

that the phrase 'graduated response' is now being used more frequently by parents. However, they accept that there are still wide differences between parents' experience in different schools.

You are committed to more face-to-face work with families. For example, a recent 'spotlight on CAMHS' day generated a lot of interest, but the messages were hard for staff to hear. Even so, you believe that a big shift in parents' views is taking place.

Thank you once again for the time and energy you invested in meeting with us.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "S. Lee".

Stephen Lee  
His Majesty's Inspector  
Assistant Regional Director