

Minutes of the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Sub-Board

27 July 2026

-: Present :-

Councillor Law (Chair)

Councillors Barbara Lewis, Nicolaou, Tolchard and Twelves

Co-opted Member

Jo Hunter, Church of England Diocese (virtually)

(Also in attendance: Councillors Bye and David Thomas)

10. Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Mike Cook, Jim Funnell and James Stock (Non-voting Co-opted Members) and it was reported that, in accordance with the wishes of the Conservative Group, the membership of the Sub-Board had been amended to include Councillor Barbara Lewis in place of Councillor Fellows for this meeting only.

11. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Sub-Board held on 3 June 2026 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

12. Fostering South West – End-to-End Regional Fostering Hub

The Cabinet Member for Children's Services – Councillor Bye and the Director of Children's Services – Nancy Meehan provided an overview of the submitted report regarding the Fostering South West – End-to-End Regional Fostering Hub and responded to questions. Key points included:

- Torbay Council will join the Fostering South West End-to-End Regional Fostering Hub in March 2027 as part of the second phase of implementation;
- the regional model aims to increase foster carer recruitment and retention while maintaining strong local relationships and support for carers;
- the proposal forms part of wider national fostering and social care reforms and builds on the existing regional fostering enquiry hub; and
- six local authorities will go live with the new arrangements on 1 September 2026, with progress reviewed monthly to inform future roll-out.

Members asked questions in respect of the following:

- which South West authorities would be included within the regional fostering hub and how would Local Government Reorganisation affect the arrangements;
- whether funding and budgets would transfer to the hub;
- how the regional arrangements would protect the strong fostering practice already established by Torbay Council, where the hub would be based, and whether support would be focussed on existing foster carers or recruitment activity;
- whether participation in the end-to-end hub was optional;
- what level of influence Torbay Council would have over the future model and the sharing of best practice;
- whether there would be a standardised package of support and benefits for foster carers across the region;
- what the key benefits of joining the regional hub would be;
- whether Torbay's strong fostering performance indicated that other authorities were performing less well;
- whether foster carers would remain with Torbay Council or transfer to the hub and how relationships with foster carers would be maintained;
- how the proposed Room Makers initiative would operate;
- the extent to which foster carers, children and young people had been involved in developing the proposals and what support would be provided during implementation;
- the potential impact on existing fostering staff and whether local fostering promotion activities would continue;
- whether there would be an opportunity to withdraw from the arrangements if they did not prove successful during the trial;
- whether there was any flexibility around the conditions and provisos contained within the recommendations to Cabinet; and
- how the financial arrangements would operate and whether funding would transfer to support the new model.

The following responses were received:

- the proposed hub would include all 15 South West local authorities, although the impact of Local Government Reorganisation was not yet known;
- concerns had been raised across a number of authorities regarding the transfer of budgets into the regional hub arrangements;
- support arrangements for social workers would form part of the transfer arrangements;
- the direction of travel nationally was towards regionalisation, with the South West region being asked to identify additional fostering households. Consideration was being given to how a centralised model could continue to meet local needs and priorities;
- Wiltshire Council was leading the development work and had been involved in preparations for the first phase of implementation, which had been in development for approximately four months;
- local authorities currently offered different support packages to foster carers. Work was underway to review and refresh Torbay's offer and contribute towards a more consistent regional approach. Increasing the number of local foster carers could improve outcomes for children and reduce placement costs;

- the regional model would provide greater flexibility, economies of scale, enhanced marketing opportunities, access to specialist expertise and a wider reach for recruitment activity;
- Torbay was currently one of the strongest performing authorities in the region in converting enquiries into approved foster households. The regional model would provide access to a wider audience, although Torbay continued to experience challenges in retaining foster carers;
- it was understood that the hub would operate as an Independent Fostering Agency, with local authorities retaining responsibilities through service level agreements and statutory arrangements. Foster carers would become part of the hub arrangements and be allocated to local authorities as required;
- the Room Makers initiative would provide access to funding to enable foster carers to adapt or extend their homes where additional accommodation was required;
- there was limited information available regarding national consultation with foster carers and families. Feedback from Torbay foster carers had emphasised the importance of maintaining relationship-based practice and ensuring carers continued to feel valued and supported;
- to mitigate concerns regarding local promotion and engagement activities, fostering awareness and communications would be embedded more widely across the Council, supported by the Communications Team and the Council's corporate parenting responsibilities;
- no formal agreements had been entered into and no funding had been committed. The current position represented an agreement in principle and provided an opportunity to review learning from other authorities before final decisions were made;
- the report would not be presented to Cabinet until later in the year, allowing further consideration of the recommendations in light of learning from authorities already participating in the pilot programme; and
- financial arrangements remained a significant consideration, including concerns around pooled budgets and the methodology used to determine financial contributions.

Resolved (unanimously):

That the Director of Children's Services, present to the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Sub-Board in January 2027, a feedback report on the process and progress of the first six authorities transferring to the South West – End-to-End Regional Fostering Hub.

13. Early Years Sufficiency Update

The Cabinet Member for Children's Services – Councillor Bye, Director of Children's Services – Nancy Meehan and the Divisional Director Education (Special Education Needs and Disability (SEND) Services) – Hannah Baker provided an overview of the submitted report regarding Early Years Sufficiency Update and responded to questions. Key points included:

- the Council had successfully met demand arising from the expansion of childcare entitlements, with sufficient early years places available across Torbay;
- average occupancy across settings was 94%, indicating strong take-up of places and no significant over-capacity despite falling birth rates;
- recruitment and retention of the early years workforce remained a challenge, with ongoing work taking place with education providers and partners to support the sector;
- twelve capital projects had created around 110 additional childcare places, with further expansion planned through a second phase of funding for two-year-old provision;
- demand for places for younger children had helped offset the impact of declining birth rates and maintain occupancy levels; and
- parental choice and the operating models of some providers continued to influence occupancy levels, with increasing flexibility being developed to better meet the needs of working families.

Members asked questions in respect of the following:

- what response rate was anticipated from the proposed termly parent and provider surveys;
- whether any trends or feedback had emerged from responses received to date;
- whether the validation data for childcare entitlement codes showed if families were accessing their full entitlement or only part of it;
- what additional information could be gathered through future engagement activities;
- when the additional childcare places would become available and how they would be allocated;
- whether the new places had already been allocated;
- what work was taking place with care experienced young people as part of recruitment initiatives with educational partners;
- how many schools currently offered nursery provision and how many did not;
- what data was available comparing outcomes for children attending different types of early years provision prior to starting primary school (written response to be provided);
- whether feedback and success rates from the work with South Devon College were available (written response to be provided);
- how many providers operated on a term-time only basis (written response to be provided);
- what action was taken where some providers had waiting lists while others had vacant places; and
- how parental choice and changing delivery models within schools were influencing the childcare market.

The following responses were received:

- the move to termly surveys represented a new approach, as surveys had previously been undertaken annually. The aim was to achieve a response rate

- of over 80% to provide robust and timely data, although actual response rates were not yet known;
- feedback received through the surveys would be reviewed over the summer period;
 - some families used their full childcare entitlement while others used only part of their allocation. Data was collected on usage levels, although the reasons for varying levels of take-up were not always known;
 - additional information was gathered through engagement events where possible, although care needed to be taken to ensure surveys remained accessible and not overly complex;
 - delivery timescales for the additional places depended on the scale of capital works required by individual providers. All 110 new places were expected to be available by the start of the next academic year. However, some providers had already allocated their additional places;
 - engagement with care experienced young people had not yet formed part of the recruitment work but this was planned for the future;
 - several schools were exploring nursery provision as a result of falling birth rates and available capacity within school sites;
 - when considering proposals for additional school-based nursery provision, assessments had been undertaken to ensure schools had sufficient capacity and were performing well;
 - Good Level of Development (GLD) data was reported by cohort rather than provider type. Recent data showed a 7% increase in GLD outcomes, and further analysis would be undertaken as additional information became available (written response to be provided); and
 - where providers had unfilled places, officers met with them to review their offer and provide advice on potential changes that could improve occupancy and better meet parental demand.

Resolved:

That the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Sub-Board note the Early Years Sufficiency Update report.

14. Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Sub-Board Action Tracker

The Sub-Board noted the contents of the submitted action tracker.

Chair
