

Inspection of Torbay local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 12 to 16 January 2026

Lead inspector: Steve Lowe, His Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care	Good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Senior leaders and politicians have a clear strategic intent to achieve what is best for the children of Torbay, addressing the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection. They have also delivered the first stages of transformation aligned with the social care reforms with clarity, drive and purpose, taking their staff with them and not losing sight of the potential impact of wholesale reform on children and families. Morale is high. Staff are motivated by the potential of this new way of working.

Importantly, the change to a more localised, multidisciplinary approach has led to improvements in several key areas of practice, with families receiving support to make changes early rather than allowing problems to escalate. The council's 'hotels to homes' initiative stands out as an example of a hard-fought victory in extending options for care leavers, engaging the local business community in corporate parenting.

For 2 small but significant groups of children, those who are suffering long-term neglect at home and those children cared for in unregistered accommodation, there is more to do. In both cohorts, some children live in those circumstances for too

long. Senior leaders have begun to harness the creativity and urgency shown elsewhere to address these complex areas of practice.

What needs to improve?¹

- The response to children who have suffered long-term neglect. (outcome 3, national framework)
- The range and supply of homes for children in care. (outcome 4, national framework)
- The frequency and quality of supervision. (enabler 3, national framework)

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: good

1. Children in need of early help benefit from appropriate levels of support at the earliest point. Increasing numbers of children are helped before difficulties at home cause them harm. A comprehensive array of support in the community, allied with family intervention teams, prevents the need for statutory intervention for most families. In line with the social care reforms and building on already strong services in early help, approximately 10,000 families are now receiving help from family hubs and supportive family networks.
2. For children who may need help and protection, timely and effective identification of their needs and risks ensures that the right decisions for children are made at the outset. Support from partner agencies is timely, with appropriate information-sharing. Children's voices are sought directly or through their trusted adults and meaningfully inform initial risk assessments.
3. When risks to children are more significant, strategy meetings are timely, with strong multi-agency attendance and decisions underpinned by collaborative information-sharing. The meetings consistently identify the immediate actions that children need to keep them safe, but occasionally lack clarity on when these actions should be completed. Child protection enquiries are detailed, with robust multi-agency involvement, a clear analysis of the level of risk to children and proportionate action planning.
4. The response to children in emergency situations outside normal office hours is effective. Most children and families receive a proportionate and timely response in relation to their circumstances.
5. There is a clear focus on children's needs when assessing the potential for early help or child in need plans. Assessment of children's needs, leading to early help or child in need plans, focuses on children. Plans are mostly analytical and clearly identify what help children require. The voice of the child is consistently evident in plans. Following the recent restructure, workers are better able to spend

¹ The areas for improvement have been cross-referenced with the outcomes, enablers or principles in the [Children's Social Care: National Framework](#). This statutory guidance sets out the purpose, principles for practice and expected outcomes of children's social care.

meaningful time getting to know families and their histories, providing prompt, bespoke practical help that is relevant to them.

6. Child protection planning ensures that children are seen regularly, and risks are monitored effectively. Initial child protection conferences are mostly timely, with evidence of appropriate safety planning, particularly when children are victims of domestic abuse. Review child protection conferences and core groups are purposeful. Positively, child protection plans are matched to the assessed level of risk and build both resilience and support. For a small number of children, their plans are not always time limited or reprioritised when risks endure.
7. For a small but significant number of children who experience neglect and are subject to a mixture of child in need and child protection plans over time, progress is too slow. Children are visited but not always with a purpose linked to their plan, and escalation into the pre-proceedings phase of the Public Law Outline (PLO) is too late, with letters to parents not clearly laying out what is expected of them. Again, for this group of children, opportunities for workers to reflect and problem-solve are not frequent enough. However, in general, the quality of social work in, and leading up to, the court arena is effective. This has led to an increasing number of children being able to remain safely at home. Recent evidence shows that social workers are using the additional rigour of the PLO more quickly when parents do not make progress.
8. All children with disabilities and additional needs who are supported by a long-term child in need plan have recently been reviewed to assure families that children are safe, and to see if they can benefit from the newly constituted family help hubs. Subsequent changes to the level and type of help they receive have resulted in more families receiving help to prevent safeguarding concerns.
9. Over 500 children have been identified as carers due to a renewed focus on their visibility and recognition. Group and social activities are widely accessible for these children, but support is not always tailored to their specific needs, due to a lack of depth in assessment and planning. Senior leaders have already identified this as an area to strengthen.
10. Unborn babies and very young children continue to be protected effectively by a joint approach between social care and health professionals. Early assessments of the potential risks to unborn children are thorough and impactful. Multi-agency panels pre- and post-birth ensure that safeguards are in place and understood by parents.
11. Children who are potentially at risk of exploitation are recognised early, with key factors such as dips in school attendance or changes in peer groups triggering a cohesive response that focuses on reducing risk from medium to low rather than responding to critical incidents. Risk assessments are thorough, showing a strong understanding of the child's needs and risk factors. When children go missing,

skilful engagement by members of the exploitation team builds a wider view of the child's lived experience, leading to effective safety plans.

12. When allegations are made against adults working with children, the response of the local authority designated officer is strong and effective, and includes learning from trends to inform training of childcare professionals.
13. Children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless know their rights and are helped to stay at home whenever possible, with imaginative support that helps families understand the reasons for conflict and rebuilds fractured relationships. If this is not possible, these children are accommodated quickly and appropriately, but with a view to returning them home when safe to do so.
14. The local authority has a secure oversight of children who do not attend school but should, and takes effective action to safeguard and support these children to receive their educational entitlement. When children are educated at home, effective support recognises that this is not always a parental choice but is driven by difficulties in keeping children in school. The virtual school responds well, with an appropriate level of challenge to schools when this is a factor.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

15. The majority of children come into care at the right time and when it is right for them. Children understand the reasons for coming into care, as their care plans are written to them in a language that they understand. Children are visited frequently, and their plans are updated based on their changing needs. The time social workers spend with children has meaning and helps them to understand their lives through engagement that is linked to children's interests. Children's records are written to them with a clear focus on presenting a picture of the child as a whole person, leading with their strengths and interests rather than their behaviour as a result of past trauma. Typically, children are described with phrases such as 'a sociable, funny and intelligent 14-year-old who enjoys biking and going to the beach', or 'a curious and inquisitive child who enjoys exploring how things work'.
16. Children are supported to maintain relationships with people who are important to them, helping to promote continuity, identity and enduring family connections. Children's permanency needs are considered and monitored effectively prior to, and following, their entry into care.
17. Children attend their reviews, or they are helped to share their views by their advocates or social workers, and have an opportunity to influence their care

plans. Independent reviewing officers make sure that the majority of children's plans are progressed in a timely way.

18. Children in care receive effective support for their academic and therapeutic development from the virtual school, which helps them stay in the same school whenever possible.
19. Disabled children in care receive appropriate support that considers their additional needs, including how they communicate and their level of understanding. For many children, this ensures that they are as fully involved in planning their future as possible.
20. Children in long-term foster care secure safe and stable matches with their foster carers at the time that is right for them. Where possible, special guardianship assessments are considered and completed to a good standard. Children living with kinship carers receive comprehensive and well-coordinated support that helps them to continue to live with trusted members of their family.
21. Children are helped to return to their families when safe to do so, with appropriate and sustainable support plans. Care orders are discharged in increasing numbers, based on stability, well-managed risks and a strategic understanding that children being at home is a better plan for them.
22. A small but significant number of children under 16 live in unregistered settings. This is due to the local authority not securing a wide range and choice of the right homes. Most children make progress. Some achieve multiple improvements based on the strategic intent to keep them in Torbay, but care planning often reflects a long-term normalisation of these illegal arrangements and a reliance on temporary or seasonal accommodation, limiting children's sense of stability, permanence and belonging. Persistent efforts are made to encourage providers to seek registration, with some recent progress. Senior leaders and practitioners maintain regular and comprehensive oversight of these arrangements and attempt to secure alternatives. Social workers and commissioners visit with increased frequency. Leaders are tenacious in their efforts to secure the right home for children, with evidence that some will transition to more suitable accommodation in the near future.
23. A significant number of children who cannot return home are adopted successfully. Decision-making for these children is timely and well evidenced. Child permanency reports are of good quality, analytical and clearly describe the children's needs and histories. From a position of stability and permanence, these children maintain appropriate contact with their parents and siblings.
24. Relationships between the regional adoption agency (Adopt South West) and the local authority are strong. Adopters report feeling well supported overall, although describe variability in communication with children's social workers and inconsistencies in the quality and timeliness of life-story work and later life letters.

This limits some children's ability to understand their past, identity and circumstances as they move into a new phase of their lives.

25. Strong leadership and independent scrutiny of the fostering service support safe, stable homes for children. However, the intended impact of the fostering hub has not been realised in terms of generating carers that match the needs of local children, hindering progress of the local authority's sufficiency plan. Despite foster carers generally feeling well supported, staffing pressures, inconsistent out-of-hours support and variability in supervision records affect continuity and responsiveness for some. Training meets basic needs but lacks flexibility and therapeutic depth, with plans in place to strengthen a trauma-informed approach.
26. Children in care are increasingly involved in developing policies and services with the help of participation workers. This helps to ensure that services are child focused and shaped in response to children's lived experiences.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

27. Most care leavers make good progress, supported by a service that is largely open, accessible and considers young people's wide-ranging needs. Recent changes have strengthened this response, with a tangible shift towards being a more proactive corporate parent.
28. While most children in care meet their personal adviser (PA) in good time before turning 18, the purposefulness and impact of this work is variable. In stronger examples, consistent visiting builds trust and informs planning. In weaker examples, limits on PAs' time reduce focus and impact. As a result, young people have inconsistent experiences of establishing relationships with their PA at this significant point of change.
29. Once young people turn 18, PAs forge positive relationships with care leavers. Consistent and dedicated PAs speak about young people with huge pride and compassion. They know young people's histories, needs and strengths well. Regular contact and practical, tailored help mean young people are clearly 'held in mind', and held in general, with their achievements recognised and confidence built to support greater levels of independence.
30. Care leavers are well supported to build and sustain relationships that are important to them, including culturally sensitive help for former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, reducing their sense of isolation following traumatic voyages to the UK.
31. Most care leavers are in good physical and mental health or are being helped to access the support they need, with recently improved resources that provide emotional support, for example the use of online access to face-to-face counselling and ongoing contact with specialist nurses they are familiar with from when they were children in care.

32. Care leavers have what they need to move forward with their lives. In general, PAs are highly knowledgeable about the services and opportunities available, connecting young people with these opportunities without delay.
33. Care leavers benefit from a comprehensive local offer. Senior leaders have already identified the need to refine some of the language in the offer to promote greater clarity about entitlement and have plans in place to review and strengthen how it is written, with input from care leavers.
34. PAs remain alert to changes in indicators of risk and take timely action in response to help keep care leavers safe.
35. Education and employment are a clear priority for PAs. Planning and support are generally well aligned to young people's interests and ambitions. As a result, the number of care leavers in education, employment and training is incrementally improving, with aspirational targets across all age groups.
36. Collaborative pathway planning supports most care leavers to plan how they will achieve their goals and aspirations. This is an improvement since the last inspection.
37. Recent changes to practice have improved the experiences of older care leavers. While a small number have needed to seek help from the service after their support was ended too soon, young people are now offered continuing support after the age of 21 and, should they opt out, they receive regular contact via birthday cards and newsletters. They often call on PAs whom they know to ask for help. Care leavers are met with quick and responsive support should they contact the team when in need of help again, providing them with a safety net as they move through adulthood.
38. While support for care leavers in custody is getting better, there have been some gaps in identifying these care leavers systematically when they are not allocated a PA. Systems for tracking care leavers' release are not fully embedded, meaning some inconsistency remains in coordinating plans for their future.
39. Most care leavers live in homes that are appropriate to their assessed needs. The circumstances and vulnerabilities of the small number who live in temporary accommodation are monitored effectively at fortnightly meetings of senior leaders while appropriate solutions are identified.
40. Impressively, the council has recently increased access to stable housing through 9 new-build properties for care leavers, enabling some young people to move out of temporary accommodation into properties with long leases and the option to buy in the future – an option rarely seen in local authorities. Similar projects that integrate local businesses into corporate solutions are already in the planning stage.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: good

41. Non-partisan political and corporate support for children's services is proactive and clearly child centred in Torbay. The recent decision by the council to make care leavers a protected characteristic is backed up by successfully bringing online new, high-quality accommodation for care leavers and a strong local offer. Corporate parenting is a core principle of the council and runs consistently through all strands of governance.
42. Senior leaders invariably know the circumstances of individual children in detail. They know children incredibly well, led by a director of children's services who brings passion, commitment and high expectations of what is right for children.
43. Relationships with partners across the Torbay Safeguarding Children Partnership continue to improve.
44. In response to the social care reforms, clear, visible leadership has communicated the vision and purpose of a wholesale transformation well, based on several years of planning and consolidation. As intended, there is a positive impact of increased early help and family support. Newly formed child in need teams are preventing escalation into statutory processes for an increasing number of families. Analytical management oversight and weekly drop-in surgeries have helped maintain workers' confidence in their practice throughout the process of organisational change. Importantly, practitioners have maintained a consistent level of practice standards through the transformation, and leaders have a clear and tangible strategy for the next steps.
45. Alternatively qualified practitioners possess clarity and definition about their role, and they add value for families with an increasingly diverse range of skills and expertise in frontline teams, including teachers, youth workers and health practitioners.
46. Keeping families together safely is a key pillar of the council's sufficiency strategy, and it is starting to gain traction. However, ensuring that there is sufficient, registered provision to accommodate the needs of children in care is an area that requires further and sustained attention.
47. A 'Language that cares' initiative to challenge practitioners to write to children in a way that makes sense to them has made a sizeable improvement to the quality and sensitivity of children's records, with the vast majority written to children, bringing their experiences to life and focusing staff at all levels on what impact their work is having on children's lives.
48. Staffing overall continues to show the improvements seen at the last inspection, with a low vacancy rate, apprenticeships demonstrating the success of a 'grow your own' approach and a high rate of permanent workers across the service.

Specialist teams such as Building Futures, the vulnerable pupils' team and the exploitation team ensure that early support identifies and reduces potential risks.

49. In general, workloads for social workers are manageable. Although some teams are at the edge of their capacity, this is closely monitored. The training programme is geared towards contemporary practice issues as well as a concrete induction programme for those new to the revised model of practice. Regular and impactful reviews, including deep dives by the chief executive, clearly show that senior leaders, including politicians, have an active and accurate understanding of trends and patterns through a suite of performance meetings that work well alongside the quality assurance activity undertaken across the service areas. In fact, quality assurance is an integrated, whole-system approach including audit, midpoint reviews and practice weeks in identifying training needs and ensuring compliance. Learning from practice is an increasingly 'live' and dynamic process.
50. Management oversight and supervision are inconsistent, with weaker examples exhibiting limited reflective focus and clear timescales for actions. In stronger examples, supervision is regular and detailed and responds effectively to children's needs. When children are facing complex issues, such as long-term neglect, supervision lacks the rigour and challenge needed to accelerate progress.
51. Additional capacity in the participation team has further strengthened the voice and influence of children and young people, and this is a key priority for politicians and senior leaders. The Children in Care Council provides a highly valued sense of solidarity and belonging for those who take part, creating a good platform for the impact of children's voices to become stronger. Children reported to inspectors that they are not sure it is making a difference quickly enough, but senior leaders have responded well to the challenge. In addition, families report an increasing level of satisfaction with the support that they receive under the new structure, with their view on what has been a success being pivotal to evidencing impact.

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