

Education Spotlight Review – Report of the Overview and Scrutiny Board

1. Introduction

The Children and young People’s Overview and Scrutiny Sub-Board (“the Sub-Board”) met on 9 February 2026 to undertake a spotlight review on education. The Members of the Sub-Board were Councillor Foster, Councillor Law (who chaired the meeting), Councillor Nicolaou, Councillor Tolchard and Councillor Twelves. Co-opted Members of the Sub-Board were Sue Lockwood who attended for Jo Hunter - Church of England Diocesan Representative, Ndubisi Obasi – Primary Academy Parent Governor Representative, Nigel Yelland – Devon and Cornwall Police (for part of the meeting) and Mike Cook – Voluntary and Community Sector and Alternative Provider (Education) (for part of the meeting).

The background papers can be found at Agenda for Children and Young People’s Overview and Scrutiny Sub-Board on Monday, 9 February 2026, 2.00 pm

The following people attended the meeting and provided responses to questions:

- Councillor Bye – Cabinet Member for Children’s Services
- Nancy Meehan – Director of Children’s Services
- Hannah Baker – Divisional Director Education and SEND
- Dan Hamer – Head of vulnerable pupils and Virtual School
- Claire Talbot – Head of Education and Corporate Services – Schools Capital
- Brian Gale – Department for Education and SEND Advisor

The Cabinet Member for Children’s Services opened the meeting by outlining the considerable engagement that had taken place with schools over recent weeks. He reported admirable work being carried out in schools despite the serious financial and operational pressures caused by falling birth rates. He also highlighted challenges relating to attendance and exclusions and noted that work continued with families to keep children engaged in mainstream education wherever possible.

2. School Improvement

The Department for Education SEND Adviser, Brian Gale, explained that many of the challenges experienced in Torbay, including rising exclusions and concerns around elective home education, were also reflected in nearby localities such as Devon and Plymouth. He reported that Torbay will undergo

a stock-take of progress in March and emphasised the importance of ongoing scrutiny and shared learning between local authorities.

Officers outlined the wider education landscape in Torbay, noting that falling birth rates continued to place significant pressure on schools. Several schools that once operated as three-form-entry now function as two-form-entry, and officers anticipate that reductions in pupil numbers will soon reach the secondary phase following the end of the recent bulge cohorts. Some schools had begun to re-utilise existing spaces, such as sensory rooms, to address changes in demand.

The Divisional Director Education and SEND described the three targeted projects being delivered through the RISE programme. The first project focuses on improving transition from Year 6 to Year 7, particularly for vulnerable pupils, by introducing enhanced, summer-based transition arrangements. The second project concentrates on attendance and behaviour, with specific attention given to highly mobile pupils who move frequently between schools. The third project aims to strengthen long-term aspiration through a cradle-to-career approach. All primary schools and non-selective secondary schools had already committed to taking part in this summer's enhanced transition initiative.

Members asked a number of questions about the progress of school improvement initiatives. They asked what support was available to young people who aspire to attend university, and officers confirmed that aspiration was a major theme raised by headteachers and that RISE was working to develop consistent frameworks to track and encourage aspiration. Members questioned how the Council could evidence positive outcomes from the RISE projects without clear baseline data. Officers acknowledged this gap and confirmed that they had asked the DfE to provide a governance and KPI framework, which had been used in other parts of the country.

Members also sought clarity on the high levels of pupil movement within Torbay. Officers reported that 180 pupils did not finish the academic year in the school where they began it in 2025, and this mobility had a measurable impact on GCSE outcomes. The reasons vary but often relate to family circumstance, sense of belonging to the school community, or the complexity of Torbay's selective and non-selective school landscape. When asked whether children who transfer from Grammar Schools to other settings feature significantly in local data, officers responded that such cases occur but not in high volume, and the more pronounced patterns were found in non-selective schools. Members also queried how many internal transfers involve South Devon High School; officers explained that slightly more than 30 pupils transferred last year, although the school remains oversubscribed and entry was restricted to Year 9 and includes a cognitive test.

Discussion continued about school collaboration, with officers emphasising that some schools work well together to support pupil movement but that collaboration varies and needs strengthening. Members also asked whether single-academy schools were seeking to join larger trusts. Officers reported that this had not occurred so far but may become more common as financial pressures increase. Members asked about school viability in the context of falling numbers, and officers explained that while schools can combine year

groups, this practice was less acceptable to modern parents. Some larger trusts were currently shielding individual schools from financial difficulty, which may mask underlying viability concerns.

3. Exclusions, Suspensions and Attendance

Officers reported that most exclusions involve assaults or threats of violence, which was consistent with national patterns. They emphasised that school leaders frequently reported growing social and emotional needs among pupils and that resources were becoming increasingly stretched. While overall exclusion numbers had fallen, exclusions for pupils with Education, Health and Care Plans remain stagnant, and concerns persist about the limited availability of specialist provision.

Attendance had improved significantly across Torbay, aided by Early Help Panels, improved youth hub engagement, new school nurse provision, and regular termly meetings with every school. Officers highlighted the substantial improvement made by Cuthbert Mayne, which was now among the twenty most improved schools nationally. However, illness-related absences had risen following a flu-heavy start to the year, and attendance in special schools requires continued focus.

Members asked whether the Council was meeting its statutory responsibility to ensure that permanently excluded pupils were placed in full-time education by the sixth day of exclusion. Officers confirmed that this was not always the case, particularly in primary settings, due to limited specialist capacity and the constraints of the Safety Valve arrangements. They expect to be fully compliant by the third week of the next term. Members asked what factors were triggering exclusions in younger children, and officers explained that an increasing number of Key Stage 1 pupils display very challenging behaviours even before receiving an EHCP diagnosis. Officers also identified concerning patterns of sexualised behaviour in older primary pupils, which require sensitive family engagement that was not always accepted.

Members asked what support exists to prevent exclusions. Officers described the primary behaviour outreach service, case conferences involving a range of partners, and the use of Section 29A powers to facilitate managed moves. They also confirmed that secondary schools collaborate through Loadstar to provide outreach support as an alternative to exclusion.

Members raised questions about isolation units and how lost learning was recovered. Officers explained that when isolation was used constructively and for brief periods, it can be effective; however, when used punitively or for extended periods, it creates additional challenges and may result in an “invisible exclusion” effect. The Government was considering expanding the use of isolation nationally, but there was currently no clear guidance on how schools should implement it.

Members sought clarification on penalty notices for non-attendance. Officers explained that penalty notices were issued only when support had been offered and when it was clear that engagement had not led to improvements. A significant proportion of notices relate to holiday absence, for which schools had no discretion under national rules. Only 5% of notices were issued to

families of pupils with EHCPs, indicating that vulnerable children were not disproportionately penalised. Members asked how many parents fail to pay penalty notices, and officers reported that non-payment rates were low, with only a small proportion progressing to prosecution.

4. Elective Home Education

Officers noted a rising trend in elective home education (EHE). They explained that families often cite dissatisfaction with school, unmet social or mental health needs, or differences in professional and parental perspectives as reasons for withdrawal. Officers acknowledged that families frequently struggle to access mental health services, which contributes to frustration and disengagement.

The Council continued to support EHE families through advice visits (where consent was given), SENDIASS, early help signposting, and the Youth Hub. Officers confirmed that safeguarding risks among EHE children remain low and that families were generally cooperative.

Members enquired about mental health concerns in EHE cases. Officers explained that many of the reasons given by families were based on their own observations rather than clinical diagnosis, and that some parents disagree with professional assessments. When asked about Section 19 funding, officers confirmed that financial support was provided only when a child was medically unable to attend school and that most EHE cases do not meet this threshold.

Members asked what proportion of EHE pupils would be eligible for free school meals, and officers estimated this to be around two-thirds. For this reason, the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme had been extended to include home-educated children. Members were concerned about access to examinations, and officers explained that EHE children must pay for exam entries privately, with typical costs of around £140 per subject. The Wellbeing Bill under consideration may create a duty only to signpost families to exam centres. Officers stated that while precise tracking of EHE NEET outcomes was difficult, around 150 to 160 young people attend South Devon College programmes each year, offering some positive engagement opportunities.

5. Free School Meals

The Sub-Board received a brief update confirming ongoing improvements to free school meal access through the introduction of automatic enrolment. The early years expansion of eligibility was noted as a positive step, and Members welcomed the benefits for family wellbeing and the importance of supporting uptake.

6. Schools Capital Programme

Officers reported continued progress with the Private Finance Initiative arrangements and academy conversion processes, particularly at Homelands, where the process had required additional legal support due to complexity. The relocation of Mayfield School to the MyPlace building was proceeding well and remains within budget, with full relocation anticipated by September.

Members expressed satisfaction that the Parkfield site had now found a sustainable long-term use. Positive engagement from Mayfield was noted and appreciated.

7. Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

Officers highlighted significant progress in SEND pathways, including a 500% rise in supported internships over the last three years. The SEND employment forum recently received praise for Torbay's achievements with the local authority being commended for assuming a leadership role across the wider system. Officers explained that grant funding had enabled this progress and that securing continued investment will be a key challenge for the future.

Members asked what internship opportunities were currently available within the Council itself. Officers confirmed placements in areas such as SENDIASS and Business Support and expressed an ambition to expand opportunities further. Members raised the disconnect between encouraging employment and the timing of concessionary bus passes for disabled people not necessarily aligning with the start or end of the working day. Discussion also covered the Graduated Response and the SEND Pledge, both of which will soon be relaunched with updated frameworks designed in collaboration with schools to ensure consistency across the borough.

8. Recommendations

1. that the Department for Education be invited to a future meeting to discuss in detail the governance and KPI's of the projects covered by RISE;
2. that the Senior Democratic and Overview and Scrutiny Officer circulate the National Readiness School Survey to all Board Members;
3. that the Director of Children Services arrange a visit to Mayfield School at Parkfield for Members of the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Sub-Board;
4. that the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Board request the Cabinet to source alternative funding to replace the NTDI grant (ends in March 2026) for the SEND employment forum; and
5. that the Cabinet be requested to consider options for amending the start time of concessionary bus fares for disabled people to enable them to engage in work.