

Thursday, 22 May 2025

**CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
SUB-BOARD**

A meeting of **Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Sub-Board**
will be held on

Monday, 2 June 2025

commencing at **1.30 pm**

The meeting will be held in the Banking Hall, Castle Circus entrance on the left
corner of the Town Hall, Castle Circus, Torquay, TQ1 3DR

Members of the Board

Councillor Law (Chairwoman)

Councillor Fellows (Vice-Chair)

Councillor Nicolaou

Councillor Tolchard

Councillor Twelves

Co-opted Members of the Board

Laura Colman, Primary Parent Governor Representative

Jo Hunter, Church of England Diocese

A Healthy, Happy and Prosperous Torbay

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Governance Support, Town Hall, Castle Circus, Torquay, TQ1 3DR

Email: governance.support@torbay.gov.uk - www.torbay.gov.uk

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY SUB-BOARD AGENDA

1. Apologies

To receive apologies for absence, including notifications of any changes to the membership of the Board.

2. Declarations of Interest

- a) To receive declarations of non pecuniary interests in respect of items on this agenda

For reference: Having declared their non pecuniary interest members may remain in the meeting and speak and, vote on the matter in question. A completed disclosure of interests form should be returned to the Clerk before the conclusion of the meeting.

- b) To receive declarations of disclosable pecuniary interests in respect of items on this agenda

For reference: Where a Member has a disclosable pecuniary interest he/she must leave the meeting during consideration of the item. However, the Member may remain in the meeting to make representations, answer questions or give evidence if the public have a right to do so, but having done so the Member must then immediately leave the meeting, may not vote and must not improperly seek to influence the outcome of the matter. A completed disclosure of interests form should be returned to the Clerk before the conclusion of the meeting.

(Please Note: If Members and Officers wish to seek advice on any potential interests they may have, they should contact Governance Support or Legal Services prior to the meeting.)

3. Urgent Items

To consider any other items that the Chairman decides are urgent.

4. Service Changes at the St Margarets and Spires Hearing Impairment Units

(Pages 5 - 14)

To review the service changes at the St Margarets and Spires Hearing Impairment units following the Councillor call for action and to consider the petition on the closure of the unit at St Margarets referred by the Council.

Supporting Documents:

- Statement from Torbay Council – response to Key Lines of Enquiry
- Statement from NHS Devon on hearing statistics
- Statement from The Spires
- Statement from St Margarets
- Petition wording

The following people have been invited to attend:

- Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Councillor Bye
- Director of Children's Services, Nancy Meehan
- Su Smart, Director of Women and Children's Improvement
- NHS Devon
- Alex Newton, Spires College
- Katherine Hunt, SENCO, Spires College
- Nicki O'Dwyer, Head of St Margarets
- Martin Thacker, National Deaf Children's Society
- Felicity Morris, Petitioner

5. Children's Services Self-Assessment

(To Follow)

To review the draft Children's Services Self-Assessment which provides an annual position on performance of Children's Services.

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Hearing impairment in Torbay ICB review: April 2025

1. Purpose of the report

Torbay Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Board have requested that Devon Integrated Care Board (the ICB) provide a written statement identifying the numbers of children diagnosed with hearing impairment in Torbay and the predicted changes over the next three years (2025-2028).

2. Statement of Response

The ICB has completed an epidemiological and service level review of relevant provision.

Based on the information available it is concluded that:

- National estimates of the volume of children and young people in Torbay with permanent hearing impairment of around 50, broadly align to the number of children and young people in Torbay with an EHCP or SEN support which relates primarily (41) or secondarily (14) to hearing impairment¹².
- Variation in uptake or demand in newborn hearing, audiology and specialist surgical intervention services are thought to be attributable to improvements in early identification and broadening of the eligibility for surgical intervention (and associated growth in wait lists), rather than growth in need.
- Over the next three years the number of children and young people with permanent hearing impairment is expected to be reasonably static with variation in line with the birth rate in Torbay.

¹ [Decision - Hearing Impairment Units - Revised Decision](#)

² [Statement regarding Hearing Impairment Units - Torbay Council](#)

Supporting Information

Types of Hearing Impairment

Hearing impairment in childhood is broadly identified as conductive or sensorineural (descriptions below). The difference is important to understand because it broadly distinguishes between typical childhood illness and permanent hearing loss.

Conductive hearing loss

- *Conductive hearing loss is when sound cannot pass through the outer and middle ear, it is often caused by blockages or infections, like glue ear.*
- *Around 80% of children will have at least one episode of glue ear by the time they are 4 years old which may cause temporary hearing loss.*
- *Conductive hearing loss is usually temporary, but the duration and impact vary significantly.*
- *Most children with conductive hearing loss will recover without specialist intervention. Some children may need grommets or hearing aids for a period to help with their hearing.*

Sensorineural hearing impairment

- *Sensorineural hearing impairment is when the inner ear doesn't work effectively. The sound vibrations reach the inner ear but don't get translated to signals that the brain can understand.*
- *Around 1 in 1,000 children are born with a significant, permanent hearing impairment and a further 1 in 1,000 children are later identified as having a significant, permanent hearing impairment by the age of 9 years.*

Population & National Prevalence Estimates

In Torbay, based upon the available ONS census data there were c.25,122 children and young people in Torbay. The birth rate in Torbay has fallen in recent years from 1,095 in 2021 to 959 in 2023 (12.4% decrease)³, however, given that this period included COVID longer term trends cannot be assumed.

Based upon the flat application of the national prevalence rate for permanent hearing impairment (sensorineural) we could expect around 50 children and young people in Torbay have permanent hearing impairment. If the birth rate continued to fall, over time, this number would be expected to reduce over time.

In considering the number of children and young people with a particular need the accuracy of any prediction is less good when the population is small and the need is less common. This is important to note because small changes in the numbers have a bigger proportional impact.

Health Provision

The NHS commissions a range of healthcare offers for children and young people in Torbay with conductive and/ or sensorineural hearing impairment. Variation in demand in these services can sometimes drive a concern about changes in the prevalence of need, however, it is important to interpret this information in context and recognise that the impact of COVID may have caused significant fluctuations in patterns of demand which don't reflect a change in need.

Newborn Hearing Screening

³ [Birth Rate to Dec 23.pdf](#)

NHS England commissions newborn hearing screening for all newborns in England which enables early identification of sensorineural, permanent hearing impairment.

Uptake of newborn hearing screening in Torbay has shown variation in recent years and, therefore, the onward volume of referrals for further investigation has varied. This variation is a factor of change in uptake and cannot be used to identify changes in prevalence of need. In Torbay over between 2020 and 2024 an average of 2.2 newborns each year were identified as having permanent hearing impairment.

Nationally, earlier identification of sensorineural, permanent hearing impairment continues to drive improvements in the screening process, including more recently enhanced monitoring of language development by health visitors in the early years. This may mean that children and young people are referred to audiology services sooner and potentially accessing support for longer. This is an improvement in the identification of need, rather than an increase in need.

Audiology Service & Torbay Hearing Support Service

Outside of routine hearing checks in newborns and the early years, if there are concerns related to a child's hearing the most common route is for the GP to refer the child to the local audiology service. In Torbay this is commissioned by the ICB and provided by Torbay & South Devon NHS Foundation Trust.

A child or young person referred to audiology will usually be assessed to understand the nature of their hearing impairment. They may then be offered a range of management strategies or treatment options according to their needs, this might include having grommets fitted or using hearing aids for conductive and/ or sensorineural hearing impairments.

Hearing aids can be used as long-term or short-term options. Short term the use of a hearing aid be offered to help a child with conductive hearing impairments, or to offer some hearing improvement for a child with sensorineural hearing impairment who is waiting for a specialist surgical procedure.

The volume of children and young people accessing the Torbay Hearing Support Service (which is for all children and young people needing a hearing aid) increased by 29% between the period of 2020-2024. Local intelligence suggests that this increase is associated with increased wait times to access specialist surgical interventions, however, numerical validation to support this is limited and trend analysis is problematic owing to the small volumes of children and young people affected.

Specialist Surgical Intervention

Children and young people from Torbay who need highly specialist surgical procedures, such as those used to place implants (i.e. bone anchored hearing aids or cochlear implants) are referred to specialist centres such as the one in Bristol (University Hospitals Bristol & Weston NHS Foundation Trust) commissioned by NHS England.

Nationally, eligibility to access some specialist surgical interventions, like placement of cochlear implants has broadened in recent years, driven by improvements in the evidence base. As a result, more children and young people are being referred to access these interventions, with initial referrals and intermediate support provided by local audiology services until surgery is undertaken. This does not signify a change in need, rather, it signifies technological advancement which will improve the experience and outcomes of more children and young people.

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Head Teacher:
Mrs N O'Dwyer

May 2025

Factual response in regards to: Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting - Service Changes at the St Margaret's and Spires Hearing Units

I joined St Margarets Academy on 22nd April 2025 as Headteacher following the retirement of Mr Tim Hughes. My report is based on the handover information I received from Tim in addition to professional dialogue with colleagues over recent weeks. My focus is primarily set on ensuring that all children within St Margaret's have their needs met, that they are safe and are in a secure position for secondary education when they leave in Year 6.

Context

There are 8 places available for pupils aged 4-11 years old with hearing loss / hearing impairment. The eligibility criteria for a place in the ERP provision is a bilateral severe or profound hearing loss, or moderate HI with other additional needs. Therefore, you can clearly see that the placement requirements are not ones of a young person that could have their needs met in a mainstream setting without a specialist provision to access daily and specialist staff on hand to support as required.

At present on roll at St Margarets we have:

- 5 pupils with an EHCP that receive support via staff at the Hearing Support Centre (HSC) via the ERP model. These five pupils will still be on roll at St. Margarets 2025-2026 academic year.
- 2 pupils without an EHCP but on pathway to application. These pupils are covered naturally by specialist staff in HSC, but will need a formal identification to receive consistent support in the future.
- 11 pupils on SEN K register for hearing impairments, who are supported by the Advisory Service and rely on the expertise of staff, our deaf-friendly approach and the adaptive teaching we have in place.
- From September 2025 we have confirmation of 3 additional hearing-impaired children that will be attending St Margarets who are receiving support from the Advisory Service until EHCP's are confirmed. From the information already received we can confidently state that at least two of these pupils would meet the requirements for the specialist places at the ERP via the HSC at St Margaret's.

Current staffing at St Margaret's stands at three specialist Teaching Assistants for HI pupils, three Deaf Inclusion Workers that support pupils with BSL communication and a Teacher of the Deaf supporting three days a week as outlined in pupils EHCP requirements.

HSC Staff:

Staff A	Teacher of the Deaf (M-W)
Staff B	BSL L6 - Deaf Inclusion Worker (DIW) M-Th
Staff C	BSL L3 - Deaf Inclusion Worker (DIW) Th-Fr
Staff D	BSL L3 - Specialist TA Th-Fr
Staff E	BSL L3 – FT - 4 days as Deaf Inclusion Worker, 1 day Specialist TA
Staff F	BSL L2 – FT - Specialist TA

Statutory Service

I am very aware that the advisory caseload has increased year on year and the current team are struggling to meet the needs of those pupils and young people requiring specialist support. I understand that business cases have been proposed in the last 18-months but I am unaware of an outcome to address this. Thankfully we have skillful and dedicated staff that are able to support with the demands, however with a reduction in funding to support the HSC this puts further strain and impacts significantly on the longer-term provision to support HI pupils.

The advisory team are small but respond quickly and efficiently to any new referrals both within and outside of term time. Specialised staff are invaluable and their expertise essential in assessing and meeting the needs of HI pupils. Since joining St Margaret's I have quickly learnt how deafness can affect a young person not just in communicating, but in how new information is processed, learnt and memorised and how only trained professionals, through working with a young person, can design a bespoke and beneficial support plan that works for them.

Community Impact

St Margarets has supported HI pupils and their families for over 60 years since it opened in 1964. The HSC and St Margaret collaboration, inclusive approach and expertise has enabled an extensive number of pupils to have their needs met, make progress in their education and be secondary school ready. By removing this valuable resource, we are changing the school identity and impacting on its offer to the community it serves.

Hearing-impaired children need a community and St Margarets has been able to offer an enhanced resource provision with eight available places.

I was informed, prior to starting at St Margarets, that without any consultation, the Local Authority directed Senior Leaders in July 2024 that it will close from September 2025. This decision was also to impact on a secondary provision at The Spires College that has also been directed to close at the same time.

I am aware that the school community, parents, staff, pupils and the PTA (Parent, Teacher Association) were extremely active leading a campaign to revert this decision to close the provisions. This closure has impacted significantly on the school community and ignited a

passion to fight for the decision to be delayed until satisfactory consultation is conducted by the Local Authority.

Consultation Concerns

I am very aware that multiple sources have expressed an alarming concern that statutory consultation was not conducted. I understand that this has been shared with you in various meetings, written accounts, letters, and petitions.

My understanding is that the statutory process for proposals to change or close resource provisions for deaf children involves extensive consultation and a focus on ensuring the best possible educational outcomes for children. Any changes must be justified by improvements in the standard, quality, or range of educational provision, and the local authority must consider the impact on children and their families, especially those most directly affected.

Consultation and Involvement:

- **Local Authority Responsibility:**

The local authority is responsible for conducting the EHC needs assessment and securing the specified provision for children with SEN, according to the Children and Families Act 2014.

- **Parental Involvement:**

Parents of deaf children must be fully consulted on any proposed changes to their child's EHC plan and be aware of their right to appeal to the Tribunal.

- **"Greatest Weight" to Affected Parties:**

The local authority should give the "greatest weight" to those most affected by proposals, especially parents at affected schools, [according to the guidance from the National Deaf Children's Society](#).

- **Opportunity to Give Views:**

Parents should have sufficient opportunity to give their views on proposals.

I have been informed that this statutory consultation was not conducted and parents of pupils with an EHCP received a letter hand delivered and opened at school to share the news of the closure without the consultation process above.

Detrimental Impact

A number of parents were significantly worried about the impact of disruption to their children's routines and the detrimental effect of potentially having to take children out of learning environments where they were comfortable. Potentially a deaf child or HI child with no identifiable community would feel very isolated and this could have a significant negative impact on their mental health and long-term progress and success.

This will materially change the identity of the school and its inclusive offer to its community with no collaboration or consultation to look at alternative approaches to help address LA SEN and funding needs and current HI provision and demand.

The HSC is more than a learning base, it is a place of safety and security. Pupils use the HSC as a healthy start to the day to enable their hearing aids and equipment to be checked, offer a place to embrace their deaf culture, come together whilst supporting SEMH and

networking with others that have a similar understanding and awareness within our wider community.

If funding to schools is now to be based on a pupil's EHCP then Torbay will lose highly trained, specialist staff due to contracts varying year on year removing consistency and specialism for our community which will ultimately negatively impact the service that Torbay can offer to our community. From what I have read, longer term, this will actually have the opposite effect to what is being sought through the closure of the centres, as the overall cost to the council will be higher due to needing to outsource the provision to other areas and facilities.

A holistic and balanced view

It is clear that since joining the school in April with no prior knowledge or emotional connection to the HSC, I can understand and appreciate the difficult decision that Torbay Local Authority had to make to release specialist places to support pupils with SEMH and also contend with the safety valve agreement. However, this swift decision was not made with appropriate statutory consultation and with accurate consideration of the current and future needs of hearing-impaired pupils. I fully agree with both my predecessor Tim Hughes and The Spires College, that if clarity in the consultation with stakeholders was conducted in collaboration with senior school leaders, appropriate alternatives could have been reached and unnecessary frustration and upset for the families we serve could have been avoided.

Kind regards,



Mrs Nikki O'Dwyer
Headteacher
St Margaret's Academy.

**Petition – Stop the Closure of the Hearing Unit at St Margaret’s
School**

1,145 paper signatures
493 e-petition signatures

We the undersigned petition the council to abandon the plans to close the vital Hearing Impairment Provision at St Margaret's Academy. Ensuring our children resident in Torbay receive the support they deserve and upholding the values of inclusion and equal opportunities for all.

Children with Hearing Impairment are being let down by the administration of both Torbay Council and Devon County Council.

In October 2024, news of the closure of the Hearing Impairment Units at The Spires College and St Margaret’s Academy was delivered to the families of those with children within these Hearing Impairment Units.

This decision means that Hearing Impairment needs will be moved from an enhanced service provided directly in school to a statutory service within education settings. One parent of a child at St Margaret’s Academy stated that her daughter previously attended a school without a dedicated unit in the past, and would have to rely on the statutory service provided within education settings. This meant that her daughter would be seen once or twice a month if she was lucky. Since starting at St Margaret’s – within 6 months her daughter has learnt to read and write, all areas of her education have improved dramatically. She will have one to one sessions with her teacher of the deaf 2 or 3 days per week, and the hard work and dedication that this team provide is invaluable to her daughters learning. At a recent visit to the cochlear implant team in Bristol, the specialists were astounded at how far she has come since attending St Margaret's Academy.

These plans have caused great stress and worry to the parents, families, and support systems they work with.

Critical for the well-being and inclusion of hearing impaired individuals, we consider the consequences of this decision have the potential to cause mass disruption to the children and young people who depend on education support.

As summarised by the National Deaf Children's Society in their document regarding Specialist provision for hearing impaired children within mainstream schools: The involvement of parents and young people, and the provision of information and support to enable them to participate in decisions is a requirement under section 19 of the Children and Families Act. This not only applies to decisions about individual support, but also about local provision more generally. Section 27 of the Act also reiterates the requirement to consult with disabled children and their parents when on wider SEND provision.

<https://www.ndcs.org.uk/media/5560/guidance-for-local-authorities-on-rps-final-2019.pdf>

A number of parents were significantly worried about the impact of disruption to their children's routines and the detrimental effect of potentially having to take children out of learning environments where they were comfortable. We consider a deaf child with no deaf community would feel very isolated and this could be detrimental to their mental health.

In the latest published reports for the Torbay Councils School Forum team, the 'Safety Valve Agreement' (stated to be viewed as a 'high priority' across the Local Area Partnership) identifies in point 3.5 that 'building confidence within the parental community on the level of provision that can be provided within enhanced resource bases' is a specified 'Agreement Condition' that is not being well met. We consider the action taken by Torbay Council for children resident within Torbay goes directly against what it is trying to achieve.

We urge Torbay Council to abandon the plans to change the delivery model for this vital service.

Together, we can ensure our children receive the support they deserve and uphold the values of inclusion and equal opportunities for all.