

Torbay Children's Services

A review of Leadership, Management and Governance

Introduction: This review was commissioned by the Chief Executive as part of her systematic approach to discharging her responsibilities for overseeing progress against the Children's Service Improvement Plan and the associated Sufficiency Strategy. A commitment to being a high performing and self-aware local authority, the report gives a position statement about the 'health' of the service and will serve to inform the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families and the Council about the quality of services available to children and families within Torbay. The review is also consistent with a recommendation set out in the 2018 Ofsted inspection report that states *"The Chief Executive to ensure that leadership, management and governance in Torbay are strong and sharply focused on improving and sustaining outcomes for children, and all recommendations from inspection activity are addressed"*. To achieve a degree of 'out of line management independence' the review has been led by Steve Hart, Independent Chair of Torbay's Improvement Board and Claire Burgess, Torbay's DfE Improvement Advisor.

The review has taken place at different times between the 21st July and 4th August. In anticipation of an imminent inspection, the review has broadly followed the methodology set out by Ofsted in its inspection framework, and has comprised:

- a critique of relevant policy, procedure, and guidance documentation
- a review of preliminary data produced by Liquid Logic
- formal interviews with managers and key staff responsible for key functions relating to the leadership, management or governance of the Children's Service or its partnerships
- an interview with the Principle Social Worker
- interviews with a variety of partners, including the voluntary sector, with significant involvement with Children's Services and a direct or indirect interest in the well-being and safety of children
- interviews with politicians, specifically the Leader of the Council, the Cabinet Member for Children and the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee
- focus groups with front line staff to understand the impact of leadership, management and governance upon their day-to-day work and their sense of security about being employees of Torbay.

The findings:

Torbay Children's Services has a recent history characterised by the impact of three inadequate inspection judgements, the most recent two being consecutive. The first of the consecutive judgements resulted in the imposition of a government Direction and the appointment of a DfE Commissioner which ultimately led to the strategic leadership for children's services being provided by Plymouth City Council under the terms of a contractual agreement.

Following the third inadequate inspection, a new Commissioner was appointed, the contract with Plymouth was ended and the leadership of children's services returned to the full control of Torbay Council. More recently, the widely welcomed promotion of the deputy to the role of Chief Executive and securing the permanent appointment of the previously fixed term DCS has underscored the already established forward momentum, focus and stability. There is now a clear and widely understood direction typified by a relentless focus upon improvement that has been underpinned by the well regarded (by Ofsted and DfE) Improvement Plan and Sufficiency Strategy. Actions that were taken early to monitor all aspects of Social Care activity and spend coupled with a radically changed approach to Improvement and Sufficiency Planning quickly enabled the budget to be controlled and the long standing annual overspends to be eradicated with the result that oversight has now returned to levels associated with a business as usual approach and a growing confidence that the management of Children's Services is strong, reliable and trustworthy despite the extraordinary challenges and pressures that have been exerted by the COVID pandemic.

The real commitment to creating a 'Child Friendly Torbay' has gained increasing traction and has provided opportunity for Children's Services, the wider corporate council, the voluntary sector and the business community to be brought together in the Strategic Partnership. It is united in endeavour to connect communities and create societal change that benefits from and contributes to substantial investment in economic regeneration. This drive, "connecting communities to the cranes", reflects the well-defined vision of the Chief Executive and the Council which absolutely sees children at the heart of Torbay's wider development ambitions. It is further supported by the Torbay Quartet which brings together on a regular basis, the Leader of the Council, the Cabinet Member for Children, the Chief Executive and DCS to monitor progress and achievements and shape the future direction that is designed to make their vision for Torbay a reality.

The strengthening through recruitment of a stronger senior and middle management team is providing greater levels of reassurance across the system shown by surveys of morale and reduced turnover in the workforce though with still significant ground to cover. It is fully recognized that although progress has been made, next steps will require attention to create a permanent senior leadership team to enable Torbay to confidently progress and to further endorse the growing confidence in the wider workforce and partners that the changes that have been made are to be sustained. It will also serve to assist the already established progress made in relation to recruitment which has seen an increase of 67 permanent posts which is reducing the reliance upon agency social work professionals who had been filling 34.4% of social work posts. This figure is being added to by the arrival of twelve fully qualified social workers from overseas with a further 21 social workers currently in the interview process.

An equal focus on retention is designed to ensure that Torbay becomes and remains a destination of choice for social work professionals. Progress is being made in reducing the previously high turnover rate of 37.8% to 27% in June 2021. 'On the ground' the strategy has been brought to life by:

- the successful launch and rapid progress of the already highly performing social work academy which has successfully supported 16 newly qualified social workers through their initial year and is about to embark on the same exercise with the next intake of 16
- a foundation programme in management for experienced social workers, advanced social work practitioners and team managers. This programme has adopted the restorative practice approach and is essentially skills based and complementary to more theoretically based management programmes offered by universities and equivalent seats of learning
- the introduction of the Aspire Programme, an initiative to develop the next generation of managers from the talent pool of existing staff whose capability has been formally recognized. The taught element of this programme is also being made available to each member of the leadership and senior management team and is being extended to YOT, Education, Early Help and Business Support colleagues.

Focus groups with social workers, including those in their ASYE year, and team managers has shown clear evidence of an encouraging belief that has been

developed among the workforce that attention to staffing issues, supervision (though opportunities exist to strengthen arrangements at senior levels), workloads and professional development is positively impacting upon staff morale and is enabling the growth of a more permanent workforce profile against a backcloth of nationwide and well-established recruitment and retention challenges. It is recognized also that a body of Torbay's interim and agency staff continue to make a positive contribution to the quality of services, and it is right that the time has been reached to embark upon an exercise offering the opportunity for those high performers to convert to permanent posts.

Actions that have been taken to reorganise the previously disjointed distribution of services has provided a structural and functional coherence to the children's social care service. The introduction of Restorative Practice, with workforce involvement and full training, as the preferred social work model has given the children's service a professional identity that has previously been elusive. There is a clear sense among those who have been interviewed that a momentum has been built which has taken the service to a stronger base beyond the immediate recovery stage that always follows the initial implementation of an improvement plan. Arguably they suggest that a platform has been built supported by an extensive range of functional policies and procedures and processes (including panels) and monitoring arrangements that places Torbay within reach of achieving sustainably good or better services. Although there have been high levels of engagement with this drive across the workforce, the very accessible and strong leadership of the DCS with the very evident support of the Chief Executive, key Councillors and by Torbay's Improvement Partner (Leeds City Council) have been instrumental in creating the environment for rapid, positive change. However, there is a realism too that there are still issues to address before practice quality fully catches up with the strategic progress that has been made. These informed views reassuringly reflect the knowledge, analysis, and the increasing maturity of a professional and voluntary sector community that knows itself well. The delay is not unusual in recovering services and it is understood that constant management attention is required to ensure that 'performance and quality gains' match strategic gains in a timely way.

Statutory and Voluntary Sector partners also recognise a stage has been reached when active consideration needs to be given to overlaying the internal focus on improvement that has been widely understood to be essential in the

first phases of recovery, with opportunities to develop and engage with partners in community-based services and cross peninsular and regional initiatives. These developments would be consistent with the ambition to make Torbay a prosperous, child and family friendly local authority area and would mark a significant departure from a perception held by some that Children's Services has been insular and siloed in its functioning which has impacted upon its willingness and ability to build trusting strategic and operational relationships.

Torbay has been acutely aware that to progress it had to take action to address the shortcomings in its IT system. It has invested heavily in replacing the outdated and very inefficient computer system with a Liquid Logic based system. The replacement has been planned over a long period of time and went live following migration on the 14th June. It offers significant capacity advantages but of particular interest is its ability to

- support practice by enabling practitioners and managers to timetable work that is prompted by its 'reminder' capability
- have (largely) intuitive work-flow pathways to ensure work can be ordered logically
- enable practitioners and managers to have contemporary access to child level data, or when required to team or service level data to support other aspects of operational and strategic management
- enable senior leaders and politicians to have 'click of a button' access to performance management information
- generate a range of standard reports and, additionally, bespoke reports with relative ease and within very acceptable time boundaries.

These advantages are welcome and reflect the extensive and diligent planning that informed the commission and system specification. However, as is inevitable following the launch of a new system, there are some teething problems which have to be systematically resolved before its full and positive impact can be realised. At the time of drafting this report, some of the issues were business critical, for example data relating to the numbers of cared for children, and for obvious reasons needed immediate attention.

Aligned with the implementation of the new system are major opportunities to ease some of the day-to-day working pressures on staff by

exploiting to the full the supports to practice and management that the system can offer. However, this requires two things to happen:

1. for the workforce, including managers at all levels, to become technically competent and be able to 'move around' and use the system with ease
2. the workforce, again including managers, to be data literate to enable the information, data and reports provided by the system to be scrutinised, contextualised and understood, generating where necessary, actions to address issues of concern or to capitalise on, or emulate existing good practice so that the end users, the children, can benefit to the full.

Although these needs are understood, at the time of drafting the required bite sized training was not developed to address the issues. Not to do so relatively quickly will introduce a risk to the successful implementation of the system and already this review heard from some who were experiencing more problems than they should in using it, with the resultant impact upon the efficiency and effectiveness of their work.

From a low base, the quality assurance system of Torbay Children's Services has been developed and implemented well providing politicians, leaders and managers with a clear window through which practice and operational management can be observed at close quarters. Of particular importance has been the establishment of Practice Weeks which provide invaluable opportunity for senior and corporate leaders and politicians to engage in a programme of meetings, observations, and discussions to see 'at close hand' the work of those at the front line and to understand the pressures that they face. These exercises are welcomed by all who take part for the invaluable opportunity they present to explore in detail the issues that arise in informed depth.

Recent long-term sickness of the substantive manager and the retirement of her interim replacement, coupled to the pressures exerted by COVID restrictions, impacted upon the volume (though not the quality) of audits undertaken but through close management scrutiny and encouragement a reasonable number have been undertaken (averaging 15 per month as opposed to the target of 25). However, the concerns generated by this 'drop off' in quantitative performance is being offset by a significant development. Creative use of development resources has enabled a

considerable block of time to be bought from a 'good' local authority with a highly regarded quality assurance system. This has enabled Torbay to secure the services of the responsible social work manager who has built upon our achievements hitherto and rationalised and restructured Torbay's approach to enable a more systematic approach to quality assurance, auditing and dip sampling. This will ensure that the lessons that are learned are derived from a sample size that is numerically sufficient to enable confident evidence-based decisions to be formulated. The approach is well considered, comprehensive and systematic and will add quality to an already competent system and, importantly, will help give assurance about the quality of work with individual children, and enable analysis and scrutiny across teams and services. Its thematic and case specific functions will strengthen and will contribute to an improved quality assurance framework.

The interim manager responsible for developing our approach is also currently operating as Torbay's interim Principle Social Worker and in that role, is converting the learning from audit and dip sampling into 'ready for launch' focused actions to improve management and practice. At the time of writing, the precise detail of how this work will be taken forward by the Learning Academy had not been fully resolved but it is anticipated that experienced Advanced Social Work Practitioners will have a crucial role to play. This is a major and fast-moving development that will add significant value to the improvement effort by ensuring that an accurate and up-to-date understanding of practice and management quality will supplement the expanding and contemporary range of quantitative performance data.

This report has indicated above that the new IT system will significantly enhance the capacity and capability of those involved in performance management. Access to contemporary and wide- ranging data that is easily available at individual, team or service level is an invaluable resource. Managers are very positive about the benefits it brings but their optimism needs to be tempered by an acknowledgement that the capability of the system will not be realised without the diligent and systematic oversight by managers. Recent history has shown that the service has wrestled with improving some aspects of longer-term underperformance and although poor quality data has always been cited as the major contributory factor, detailed analysis has shown that management practice has required strengthening and supporting. This work has started with the weekly

scrutiny of performance in those areas identified for improvement and the Improvement Operations Board has the requirement for the presentation of a 'highlight report' on each of these areas at every meeting. This additional layer of detailed scrutiny supplements the regular and established 'performance surgeries' which examine and understand challenges facing teams using child level data to do so. These initiatives have led to understanding of the issues and some significant improvements to be made and close scrutiny will continue until progress is judged to be sufficient, at the required level of quality and sustainable. For example, improved performance highlights include:

- the MASH completed contact rate (at 97% from 86% despite increased demand)
- increase in number of CP conferences within 15 days (80% from 63%)
- a decrease in the numbers of children subject to a second or further CP Plan
- improved performance in pre-proceedings and achievement of statutory timescales
- significant decrease in the cared for population from 352 children to 307, improvements in placement stability and statutory visiting compliance (now 78% from 50%), and an improvement in the proportion of cared for children living with Torbay foster carers (63% from 55.7%)
- significant reduction in the numbers of children living in residential settings (currently 22 children, a reduction from 42 previously) and a similar reduction in the proportion of cared for children living more than 20 miles from home (26.2%)
- major improvements in securing permanency for cared for children
- major improvements in securing health and dental checks and high performance in relation to annual health reviews
- significant improvement in the identification and response to children vulnerable to sexual exploitation (182 from 47).

Partnership work within Torbay has developed over the life of the Improvement Plan and it is noticeable that as the impact of the plan has begun to take hold, the focus on the strength, role and function of partnerships has begun to gain traction. This is well-illustrated by the highly successful impact of the implementation of the improvement priority to reduce Torbay's reliance on high-cost residential care solutions which has

been mirrored by the development of Torbay's Corporate Parenting Board, aided significantly by LGA input, into a body that is developmental, challenging and supportive and able to fulfil its statutory function.

Those involved in Boards have been clear that they have very definitely noted the overdue but welcome strengthened management approach to the extensive range of Torbay Children's Service's challenges which have been supported by the Chief Executive and politicians. They have seen positive improvements over the last 12 months and are confident that the changes that have been made are secure, sustainable and, unlike initiatives over the recent history, unlikely to slip back if individuals leave. Whilst not undermining the strong threads of resilience and professional leadership underpinned by generally good structural links, there is also a realisation that some partnership work is still work in progress reflecting the complexity of the task and the sheer volume of improvement work that has needed to be tackled. For example, it is noted that there is no formal link between the Community Safety Partnership work on domestic abuse and sexually harmful behaviours and the Early help Board, a finding that is surprising given the prevalence of domestic abuse in families accessing early help.

The examples described above provide illustration that while significant progress has been made across the partnership spectrum in Torbay, the time has probably arrived when the Boards need to take stock, reflect on achievements and future direction, and consider what needs to be added or adapted to ensure they are 'fit for purpose' to tackle the next stages of their development. Consideration also needs to be given to whether it is possible to affect some rationalisation of the number of Boards which some felt were duplicative and expensive in terms of time spent on servicing them. This work has begun, for example in the Safeguarding Partnership where the roles of the Independent Scrutineer and the Chair of the Executive are being reconsidered, and now needs to be built upon in the forthcoming months.

The next phase of improvement planning also offers an opportunity to strengthen and build the effectiveness of the Children's Service by developing and consolidating the relationships between social care, schools, early help and public health so that each element of service can unite behind a common purpose on behalf of the children of Torbay. It is

very understandable that against a backcloth of Ofsted judging schools to be good or better, and social care services to be inadequate that the initial focus has been on social care services with the absolute priority to ensure that children are properly protected and safeguarded. This review has found that all parties are convinced that this first priority has been achieved, notwithstanding that there is an absolute realisation that there is no room for complacency. This progress enables the focus to widen, and evidence is re-enforcing the need to focus on wider children's services and their inter-relationships. The recent SEND Peer Review reenforced this view by highlighting the necessity for children and their families to benefit from an understanding about how to access 'joined up' services that worked to prevent the need for escalation. It also endorsed the earlier proposition that further work is required to align the Board structures and inter-dependencies, for example, the Local Education Board and the Health and Well-being Board.

The challenges of engaging some schools in the early help agenda, despite extensive consultation demonstrates the importance of work to align priorities and priority actions within a fully integrated children's service. Similarly, opportunities to build upon the work of the revitalised public health input need to be taken as the council builds its wider agenda to ensure that Torbay becomes a highly desirable location within which children can live, thrive, and develop. However, it is very evident that children and young people are not benefiting from a sufficiency of CAMHs provision which is impacting upon the improvement agenda. For example, only 5 cared for young people are in receipt of direct CAMHs provision, an extraordinarily low figure that determines that an urgent and immediate review is required to establish the required level of resource to meet assessed and established need.

Conclusion:

This report has tracked the very evident progress that has been made in securing the level of improvement needed to lift Torbay out of the necessity for Government intervention. The essential initial focus on protecting children has been relentless and necessary. A strategic and political platform has been constructed that is comprehensive rational and supports good practice and performance management while stimulating recruitment and retention. In addition, performance across the Children's

Service has shown signs of improvement against its improvement objectives and rigorous management processes and improved performance capability are designed to maintain the momentum. Therefore, Children's Services can now move on from the period of crisis management and properly occupy a place where it can continue to grow to become a trusted partner and community leader that can play its full part in enabling Torbay to achieve its wider vision of creating a prosperous, child friendly local authority area.

None of the progress identified in this review could have taken place without the accessible and clear leadership of the DCS supported by the very involved Chief Executive and councillors. It is possible to predict with absolute confidence that the commitment demonstrated by the individuals concerned will continue to the next phase of their continuous improvement journey as Torbay Children's Services embraces the opportunities available to move away from the crisis period. There is no detectable complacency about the challenges that still face the service and it is hoped that the recommendations set out below will assist the granular discussions that will now take place. It is to be noted that the order of the recommendations do not imply their priority but rather they are ordered to follow the evidence contained in the text above.

Recommendations:

1. Take steps to recruit to vacant senior management posts to create a permanent leadership team to lead the Children's Service through its next stage of development and beyond.
2. To continue with the existing initiative to support Recruitment and Retention with a particular additional focus on recruiting suitable existing agency staff to permanent posts.
3. To consider how Children's Services can develop further its work with the voluntary and community sector and its statutory partners and expand its role into peninsular-wide and regional initiatives.
4. Continue to develop staff knowledge, through training where necessary, of the capability and application of Liquid Logic to support their core work.
5. To implement in full at the earliest opportunity the revised Quality Assurance Framework and ensure there are mechanisms in place to

capture learning from audit activity that can be implemented into practice and management without delay.

6. To complete at the earliest opportunity the work that has begun to review the necessity for, and governance arrangements for the existing Children's Services related board structures.
7. To commence the work focussing on the development of a fully integrated and functional Children's Service.
8. To take urgent action to address the sufficiency requirements for a functional CAMHs service in Torbay.

Stephen Hart, Independent Chair, Torbay Children's Service Improvement Board.

Claire Burgess, DFE Improvement Advisor for Torbay Children's Services.

2 August 2021.