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James McNeillie HMI
Regional Director

Ms Nancy Meehan - Director of Children's Services
Sent via email: nancy.meehan@torbay.gov.uk

Dear Nancy,

Thank you for meeting with me and Dominic Stevens, Senior HMI, Social Care, on 9 March 2023. Please extend our thanks to Anne-Marie Bond – Chief Executive, and your team for their valuable contributions.

Social Care

Following on from the strong progress highlighted at your most recent inspection, this year's annual engagement meeting felt positive and forward looking. Although the slides and supporting documents you shared with us gave a clear picture of your journey of improvement and of your present strengths and areas for development, your focus on how to meet emerging and future challenges and to continue to drive improvement was clear. You talked about how you continue to have a whole council commitment to delivering services for children. In times of great pressure on local authorities' services, the council's ongoing financial commitment to children's services is demonstrative of this commitment, as was the presence at the meeting of your chief executive Anne-Marie.

Alongside key priorities, you were keen to highlight external validation of the progress you have made. This includes being selected as a Family Hubs 'trailblazer', achieving restorative organisation status, and being shortlisted for the 'Children and young people now' awards for your learning academy and workforce transformation.

It was helpful to hear about how you are developing and strengthening your three family hubs into a 0-19 (25 for those with SEND) service. The co-location in the hubs of midwifery and breastfeeding services alongside more focussed services, such as those aimed at fathers, youth homelessness, housing officers and a local version of 'Pause' were also positive developments that it was good to hear about. You believe that these ongoing changes are having a positive impact for children. For example,

you said that you think that earlier intervention in families has contributed to a reduction in domestic abuse referrals and in re-referrals to your 'front door'. To help to give you assurance that you are getting the balance right between early help and child in need work, you continue to audit 'step-down' decisions. You have also had positive feedback from partner agencies that this work is generally proportionate. You were also clear with us that, although it is already a key focus in this and all areas of children's services, you want to further strengthen how you engage with and listen to children and their families as part of the co-production of services. This focus on early help and being a trailblazer for family hubs clearly provides you with a positive foundation as we all look ahead to the implementation of the governments 'Stable homes built on love' programme of change.

Post pandemic, the 'cost of living crisis' has worsened the impact on children and families in Torbay of existing difficulties with the cost and availability of housing and the impact of deprivation. The extent of this concern is such that you have declared a housing crisis and now have a strategic housing board focussed on putting in place measures to address this. Whilst your family hub work is a key plank in addressing wider challenges for families, you also told us about how difficulties with securing suitable or affordable housing are a challenge for particular groups such as foster carers and the children who live with them, care leavers and asylum-seeking children and families. Through your strategic housing board, you have just purchased 43 flats and will be designating some of these for care leavers.

We challenged you about a recent rise in the number of children becoming subject to child protection plans for a second or subsequent time and a reduction in the frequency of statutory visits. You told us how you believe that, whilst such things often have multiple causes, you had identified two factors in particular. You told us how the presence of asylum holes linked to higher caseloads for workers in the relevant teams. With caseloads, 'hovering around 20', which is higher than you aspire to, social workers have sometimes been both slower to visit and slower in recording these visits. In addition, you have identified a number of larger families with chronic problems whose children have become to subject of plans after not receiving the most effective or consistent support when they were previously the subject of plans. You believe that, with improved services across the board, the number of such, 'legacy cases' will reduce over time. You have also introduced the Graded Care Profile, to support social workers in identifying and tackling chronic neglect.

You are understandably proud of the work you have done to strengthen both edge of care support and your approach to both court work and to the pre-proceedings phase of the public law outline.

In common with local authorities across the country, ensuring that you have sufficient foster homes and children's homes continues to be a challenge, especially for those children with the most complex needs. At this point in time, you have just

one child in an unregistered children's home. You do not believe this is acceptable and consequently closely monitor the care and planning of children in such placements, alongside those who are also in very expensive placements or particularly vulnerable. You are working to safely reduce the number of children in care and to move children living in children's homes in other parts of the country back to Torbay and into foster families whenever possible. From 368 at its highest, your number of children in care (including 26 UASC, which is above your 01% target of 25) has reduced to 329. Alongside foster placements becoming special guardianship and other routes out of care, this has included a high number of children (45) achieving reunification with their families over the last year. You have experienced a slight reduction in the number of foster carers over the last year, from 84 down to 78. Whilst this is of course disappointing, it was good to hear that several of these departures were for the good reason that foster carers have become special guardians for the children living with them and that with recruitment currently under way you will soon be up to 85. You also talked us through a range of other measures that you have in place to improve foster carer recruitment and retention and to support children's placement stability. These include therapeutic fostering, training about sensory processing for foster carers, £1000 loyalty payments and the completion of a placement breakdown analysis to understand the causes behind placement instability and breakdown and to help you to best plan and direct support. Whilst your long-term placement stability is at 67%, the number of children experiencing three or more moves in a year is relatively high at 15%. You think that quite high numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children coming into care has been a particular cause for this and are working hard to improve things for children.

While, like sufficiency, ensuring that you have enough suitably trained and experienced social workers is a challenge for all local authorities, you also see this as an area in which you are doing well and in which you have momentum for further progress. You told us about how social workers value the support and training they receive and the ethos of Torbay, of how some staff who have previously moved away are now coming back and of how you have achieved greater stability at middle management level. While the attraction of agency rates of pay to social workers, including those that you have trained as ASYE social workers, remains a challenge, you report that most ASYE workers are staying and that you are training up your future experienced social workers.

Special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND)

- You provided a comprehensive, open, and honest account of the progress the local area has made since the inspection, and you were very clear that there is still much to do.
- You described a local area-wide approach of stripping back to the basics and then building on these foundations – acknowledging that not all foundations

are there and that longer-term improvements will take time but still having to make the experiences of children and families better now.

- You feel that the voice of parents and carers has been a key driver for the progress you are making. The relationship has been changed and everything is now about coproduction, with families and children involved in writing the SEND strategy and their voices being integral. Families are reporting that they feel more listened to by the local area, but you and they acknowledge that not enough parents and carers are yet experiencing the changes on the ground.
- There has been a consistent focus on helping all partners and stakeholders understand the culture of SEND and in some ways having to 'change the narrative'. For example, the highest number of EHCPs are for SEMH and there has not been a consistent view of when a plan is needed to provide the extra support, and when support can be given without the needs of a plan.
- For those children who do not meet the threshold for EHCPs, there is a next steps panel for families to explain the reasons and to point them to the support that is available.
- ECHP – timeliness is low, with currently about 27% meeting the statutory timescales. Officers have explained to families the reasons for the delay – mainly related to resourcing – and what is being done about that. You described a significant piece of work being done on quality of plans. Your auditing has identified that plans are too long and not written in a family-friendly way, with too much weighting to education and not enough read across from partners. Your plans to improve this, and these are beginning to show signs of fruition are linked to staff training and quality assurance multi-agency panels. You are also closely monitoring EHCPs for post-16 children and learners.
- Your Sector Led Improvement Partner is Islington, and you feel that their experiences have and will continue to bring good benefit. For example, in relation to your graduated response, to how high levels of exclusions related to SEMH can be reduced and their work to complement yours in early years.
- You are keeping a very close check on part-time timetables for pupils in schools, drawing on the DfE's advice and challenging school leaders where this is needed.

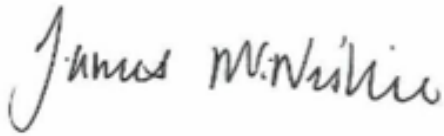
Exploitation: county lines, and radicalisation and extremism

- Although Torbay is relatively small, all types of exploitation are evident
- Current main issues relate to large amount of moped and vehicle theft and this type of behaviour is being glamourised in the Torquay and Paignton areas. There is multi-agency mapping exercise to consider links between adults and young people in relation to this.
- There is increasing concern about county lines and specific individuals and families linked to the West Midlands region. You identified good multi-agency work in this respect including using all available information for colleagues in various agencies.

- You described good working relationships between local authority officers and the police, and with agencies in neighbouring authorities including youth justice teams.
- There are a range of strategic and operational meetings that focus on exploitation. For example, those that focus on partnership intelligence and understanding and then those that deal with individual concerns and actions to take, such as the Friday triage meeting involving all partners.
- You identified some specific cases where you pointed to success, for example an 11-year-old girl and a young adult who had gone missing. This was quickly stopped.
- You outlined that in relation to Prevent referrals and concerns about radicalisation, you have referred nine individuals for consideration: three have gone to Channel, one is live, and the others did not meet thresholds. They are predominantly right-wing issues. All related to young males, with two referrals coming from the police and the others from schools. You explained that this form of exploitation is well-embedded in the wider extra-familial harm work that you do.

Thanks to you and your colleagues for the time spent preparing and for their contributions to this useful meeting.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James McNeillie".

James McNeillie HMI
Regional Director, South West, Ofsted