

Area SEND inspection of Torbay Local Area Partnership

Inspection dates: 17 to 21 March 2025

Dates of previous inspection: 15 to 19 November 2021

Inspection outcome

There are widespread and/or systemic failings leading to significant concerns about the experiences and outcomes of children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), which the local area partnership must address urgently.

A monitoring inspection will be carried out within approximately 18 months. The next full reinspection will be within approximately three years.

As a result of this inspection, HMCI requires the local area partnership to prepare and submit a priority action plan (area SEND) to address the identified areas for priority action.

Information about the local area partnership

Torbay Council and NHS Devon Integrated Care Board (ICB) are responsible for planning and commissioning services to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND in Torbay, as part of the Torbay Local Area Partnership. The partnership oversees the commissioning of local education, social care and health provision for children and young people with SEND.

The commissioning of health services changed across England in 2022. In Torbay, the responsibility for health services passed from Clinical Commissioning Group to NHS Devon ICB on 1 July 2022.

Torbay Council commissions a range of alternative provision (AP) for children or young people, including those who cannot attend school due to social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) and medical needs, or for those who are at risk of or have been permanently excluded.

What is it like to be a child or young person with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) in this area?

Too many children and young people with SEND wait an unacceptable time to have their needs accurately identified, assessed and met. The experiences of children and young people with SEND in Torbay depends on who they meet along their journey. If dedicated professionals recognise their needs early on and work collaboratively with colleagues from education, health and social care, the children and young people can access the right support at the right time.

Once individual needs are identified, often knowledgeable and skilled practitioners provide help and support to the child and young person and their families. For example, children and young people with SEND who access a specialist school setting or work with the children with disabilities team often receive the right help. Colleagues from across the partnership work together through the Family Hubs to access appropriate early years support and help from a wide variety of agencies, such as speech and language therapy and intensive support at home. Likewise, the work of early help, family intervention team and youth justice service makes a positive difference for the children and young people with SEND that they work with.

Some children and young people with SEND miss large amounts of their education. This is particularly the case for children and young people receiving SEN support. Too many of these children and young people are placed on part-time timetables, are suspended or are excluded from school. Those who are placed in registered AP typically have their needs met well. However, many are placed in unregistered AP. The local area partnership does not currently check the quality of education that these settings provide. The attainment of children and young people with SEN support is below that of their peers nationally. Their attendance at secondary school is lower than the national average. They are less likely to continue into education, employment or training post-16.

Long waiting times for health assessment, and diagnosis, coupled with gaps in provision, often leads to children and young people's needs becoming greater while they wait to get the right support. For example, their mental health deteriorates as they need more support than the mental health in schools team can provide, but do not reach the threshold for child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) support. As a result, families reach crisis, and they require more intensive support later. Some parents and carers told inspectors they have no option other than to home educate their child.

The views of children and young people, as well as their parents and carers, are starting to be heard more effectively. This has led to the creation of useful projects such as the neurodiversity support programme run jointly by the Parent Carer Forum, SEND Family Voice Torbay (SFVT) and health practitioners from the neurodiversity pathway. Children and young people's ambitions and goals are now routinely recorded in their education, health and care (EHC) plans. However, while the timeliness of the completion of EHC plans is improving, many plans are finalised without contributions from health or social care professionals. This does not reflect the support that is being accessed or should be available to the child and young person and contributes to gaps in provision at times.

Through the early help offer, children and young people with SEND access services which support their inclusion in their communities. Nevertheless, children and young people and their parents told us that they would like more opportunities to be part of the Torbay community, to have help to make and meet new friends. The lack of short breaks means that many miss out on these experiences.

Children and young people, along with their parents and carers, helped to co-produce the local area's SEND strategy and graduated response. However, practitioners working with young people aged between 19 and 25 do not have a graduated response to know how to remove barriers and support young people to prepare for adulthood effectively.

What is the area partnership doing that is effective?

- In some aspects of its work, the local area partnership has successfully improved services. For example, the healthy child programme is delivered in partnership with Family Hubs and other services. Children aged 0 to 5 years old benefit from a range of professionals working together to support the family while being assessed for autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. The youngest children with SEND have their needs identified at the earliest opportunity. This work results in early referrals and helpful information being shared with education, health and social care providers.
- The mental health schools team works effectively with others to offer an innovative and flexible service that attends to children and young people's SEMH needs that are known and or referred to their services. Across these services, children and young people have access to a neurodiverse specialist in their team, and an in-reach youth worker service, as well as workshops to upskill children for the future. This helps to meet these children's needs effectively.
- SFVT is represented on boards and workstreams to highlight the view and experience of the parents and carers that it represents. There are some effective examples of co-production, including increased SEND communication via a newsletter and the well-received fair play day.
- Whenever possible, dedicated practitioners take time to build positive working relationships with children and young people with SEND and their parents. For example, the SEND information, advice and support service team members are committed to offering support and signposting to parents and carers.
- Children identified as being at risk of exclusion and appropriately supported by the fair access panel multi-agency team, typically remain or return to education or training successfully.
- Work has started within the 5 to 18 autism pathway to make sure that a range of professionals provide a coordinated assessment process for children and young people. For example, the speech and language therapy team and the learning disability team are now an active part of this pathway. Work has recently started to provide an improved offer of support to children and young people while waiting to access services, support or assessment.

- The use of the dynamic support register (DSR) is well established. Children and young people with a diagnosis of autism or a learning disability who are referred to the DSR and are at risk of admission to a mental health hospital benefit from liaising with a single point of contact through the key-worker service. There are plans in place to further strengthen this service by increasing capacity in the team.
- Children and young people with long-term or complex medical conditions, particularly in special schools, benefit from the community and specialist school nursing team offer. This includes access to services in a timely manner alongside a coordinated approach to delivering care. For instance, the team collaborates with professionals, particularly across health, to help meet the needs of children and young people with SEND.
- Arrangements are in place to oversee the quality of placements for children with SEND who are placed out of area in residential children's homes. Where social care staff have persisted, young people with SEND remain in their area of choice and secure suitable accommodation and support to meet their needs. Routine checks help practitioners to respond to any concerns or issues the child has experienced.
- Transition into adult services for young people with extremely complex care needs, who are totally dependent on services, and those in residential care placements which end at 18 years old, is sometimes successful.

What does the area partnership need to do better?

- Since the previous area SEND inspection, in 2021, leaders have not urgently or effectively addressed systemic and significant weaknesses in the experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND in Torbay. Many long-standing issues, particularly the waiting times for assessment and diagnosis, parental dissatisfaction and the high proportion of children and young people with SEND being excluded and becoming NEET, have remained unresolved issues. Too many children and young people with SEND in Torbay have poor experiences and outcomes due to the lack of access to the right provision and support at the right time.
- At the time of the inspection, joint commissioning was in flux. The impact of this is far reaching. For example, local area leaders have not developed a strategic approach to commission sufficient quality AP to ensure placements adequately meet the needs of children and young people with SEND. Special school places in Torbay are not commissioned for children with autism, despite this being one of the greatest areas of need in the local area. As a result, some children and young people are missing out on full-time education.
- Those responsible for governance do not have an accurate understanding of the local area partnership's strategic SEND priorities. The resulting lack of strategic working and effective joint commissioning has resulted in poor communication and collaboration between the local area partnership and families. Too often, the strategic updates requested by those responsible for governance do not accurately identify the impact of decisions made and work done for children and young people with SEND. This does not support the local area partnership to understand and prioritise its

strategic planning or actions.

- Many areas of work towards achieving the 2023 SEND strategy have not started or are in their infancy. For example, the partnership's work to identify and reduce the number of children and young people not in education, employment or training has begun, but it is too early to see the impact of this work.
- There is currently no commissioned learning disability pathway in Torbay. It is unclear who is responsible for making a formal diagnosis of learning disability. This means that there is an increased risk that some children and young people will not receive the benefit of support from the learning disability team, or from annual health checks, which are important in identifying and providing appropriate support to address their changing needs.
- Children and young people wait too long for a range of services across health. This includes CAMHS, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, neurodiversity pathways and community paediatrics. Gaps in healthcare services, such as out-of-hours palliative care and difficulties accessing specialist sleep management services, compound the fact that the needs of children and young people are not well met.
- The local area partnership recognised that the graduated response, introduced in September 2023, was not fully implemented in May 2024. However, a pilot of the locality model that aims to bring practitioners together in their work with children and young people with SEND will not begin until June 2025. In the meantime, insufficient resources, including access to knowledgeable practitioners from across the partnership, constrain its ability to identify and meet children and young people's SEND at the earliest opportunity.
- Access to the early years multi-agency support stops when children begin school. This contributes to the growing attainment gap between children and young people with SEN support and their peers as they progress through their education.
- Some children and young people do not have access to timely home improvements and adaptations in order to meet their needs. Lengthy delays in accessing funding to facilitate this significantly impacts on the lived experience of children and young people and their families.
- Torbay has placed a small number of their children with SEND in unregistered children's homes. Some of these children have been in these placements for too long. Commissioning of appropriate placements in the area remains a challenge.
- Across education, health and social care, preparation for adulthood does not happen soon enough. For example, transition arrangements from child to adult health services are difficult because the thresholds for accessing adult services are different, or the equivalent service is not always available. Sometimes, limited suitable residential placements and accommodation leave some disabled young people and their families without the assurance of knowing where they will live in the future or if they will have their wider needs met prior to their 18th birthday.

Areas for priority action

Responsible body	Areas for priority action
Torbay Council and NHS Devon ICB	The local area partnership must work together to urgently strengthen the systems that support partners' collaborative work at all levels. This includes the development and use of more effective governance arrangements to ensure improvements are made to SEND services in a timely manner.
Torbay Council and NHS Devon ICB	The local area partnership must strengthen its commissioning arrangements to meet the identified needs of children and young people with SEND in Torbay. This includes strengthening the way that the joint strategic needs assessment is used to accurately identify and effectively manage risks when service gaps are identified across the partnership.
Torbay Council and NHS Devon ICB	The local area partnership, including school leaders, must strengthen its multi-agency working to ensure that children and young people's needs are identified, assessed and met in a more efficient and timely manner through cohesive pathways across health, education and social care. This includes the following: - the effective use of the graduated response, - EHC plans accurately reflecting need, next steps and provision for children and young people, - reducing levels of suspension and exclusion from secondary schools.
NHS Devon ICB	Leaders must reduce waiting times across health services and strengthen the offer of support available to children and young people and their families while waiting for health assessments and diagnosis. This includes CAMHS, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and community paediatrics.

Areas for improvement

Areas for improvement
Leaders across the partnership should consider ways to further improve and embed the way that co-production is used across the partnership.
The local area partnership should continue to build on the work that has already been started in improving working relationships with parents and carers.

Leaders across the partnership should improve oversight of the impact of its support for children and young people receiving SEN support who are not accessing full-time education, for example those who are placed in unregistered AP.

Leaders across the partnership should improve their oversight and strengthen joint working across services to support preparation for adulthood arrangements. This also includes improving the way that child and adult services are joined across all health services for children and young people with SEND so that the journey into adult health services is easier and more accessible.

Local area partnership details

Local authority	Integrated care board
Torbay Council	NHS Devon Integrated Care Board
Nancy Meehan, Director of Children's Services	Steve Moore, Chief Executive Officer
www.torbay.gov.uk	https://onedevon.org.uk
Town Hall Castle Circus Torquay TQ1 3DR	Newcourt House Old Rydon Lane Exeter EX2 7JU

Information about this inspection

This inspection was carried out at the request of the Secretary of State for Education under section 20(1)(a) of the Children Act 2004.

The inspection was led by one of His Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) from Ofsted, with a team of inspectors, including: two HMI from social care; an Ofsted Inspector from education; a lead Children's Services Inspector from the Care Quality Commission (CQC); and another Children's Services Inspector from the CQC.

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