

Meeting: Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Sub-Board

Date: 27 July 26

Wards affected: All

Report Title: Fostering South West – End to End Regional Fostering Hub

When does the decision need to be implemented? Immediately

Cabinet Member Contact Details: [Cllr Nick Bye, Lead Member for Children's Services](#)

Director Contact Details: Nancy Meehan, Director of Children's Services

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 This report seeks Cabinet approval for Torbay Council to join the Fostering South West end-to-end regional fostering hub from March 2027. The proposal forms part of the national Fostering Recruitment and Retention Programme, which aims to increase fostering capacity, improve recruitment and retention, and strengthen support for foster carers and children.
- 1.2 The proposed hub model moves beyond the current recruitment-focused regional front door and will include the full fostering journey from enquiry, assessment and approval through to post-approval support. For Torbay, this will mean participating in a regional model while retaining clear local accountability for statutory responsibilities, safeguarding, placement sufficiency and the quality of support provided to children and foster carers.

2. Reason for Proposal and its benefits

- 2.1 The proposals support Torbay's ambition to ensure that children who cannot live with their birth families are able to live in safe, stable, nurturing family homes wherever this is in their best interests. Torbay has the highest rate of children looked after in the South West, the highest spend per capita, and a high proportion of children placed out of area. Strengthening local and regional fostering capacity is therefore an important part of improving outcomes for children and managing sufficiency and cost pressures.
- 2.2 The data shows that Torbay is performing strongly in fostering recruitment when compared with the region. Torbay has the highest rates across all five recruitment pipeline metrics, including expressions of interest, initial visits, applications received and applications

approved. Torbay's total enquiry-to-approval conversion rate is 10.2%, compared with the regional average of 3.1%, and Torbay's average total process time is 228 days compared with the regional average of 254 days. Joining the hub provides an opportunity to build on this local strength, share best practice across the region and benefit from additional investment, data insight, regional training and targeted support.

3. Recommendation(s) / Proposed Decision

- 3.1 That Cabinet approves Torbay Council joining the Fostering South West end-to-end regional fostering hub from March 2027, subject to the final operating model, financial arrangements, legal agreements, workforce implications and risk mitigations being agreed.
- 3.2 That Cabinet delegates authority to the Director of Children's Services, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Councillor Nick Bye, the Chief Executive, the Director of Finance and the Director of Corporate Services, to agree the detailed implementation arrangements for Torbay's transition into the hub.

4. Appendices

Appendix 1:

Appendix 2:

5. Background Documents

- Supporting Information

6. Introduction

- 6.1 Fostering South West currently provides a regional recruitment and marketing offer and a single front door for fostering enquiries. The proposed end-to-end model would extend this into a more integrated regional offer covering recruitment and marketing, enquiry handling, journey guide support, pre-approval support, assessment coordination, enhanced data and insight, and post-approval support. The Department for Education has confirmed that authorities joining an end-to-end hub during 2026/27 will be eligible for funding streams including Room Makers, Mockingbird and potential Innovation Fund opportunities. The DfE has also indicated that any authority intending to join by March 2027 will receive its full 2026/27 allocation, whereas delivery beyond March 2027 risks loss of funding.

7. Options under consideration

- 7.1 Option 1: Join the Fostering South West end-to-end hub from March 2027. This is the recommended option. It enables Torbay to remain part of the regional programme, secure access to national funding opportunities, influence the developing model, and implement change in a phased way that allows local governance, workforce consultation and engagement with foster carers to be undertaken properly.

- 7.2 Option 2: Join earlier, from September 2026. This would align with the first cohort of early adopter authorities but is not recommended for Torbay because the timescale would not allow sufficient time for Cabinet approval, detailed financial and legal due diligence, workforce consultation, local implementation planning and meaningful engagement with foster carers and staff.
- 7.3 Option 3: Do not join the end-to-end hub at this stage. This is not recommended. It would reduce Torbay's influence over the regional model, risk loss of access to associated funding, and could limit opportunities to address sufficiency pressures through shared recruitment, data, training and support. It would also leave Torbay outside a national direction of travel in fostering reform.

8. Financial Opportunities and Implications

- 8.1 The regional costed plan identifies indicative one-off set-up costs of £802,000 and ongoing annual costs of £2.806 million across the seven design areas and cross-cutting programme costs. The largest areas of expected ongoing cost relate to the single front door, assessment coordination, recruitment and marketing, and cross-cutting leadership, management and governance. These figures are regional planning assumptions and will require further work to determine Torbay's share, affordability, funding sources, and any ongoing local budget implications.
- 8.2 There is a financial opportunity if increased fostering capacity reduces reliance on residential care; the Department for Education estimates an average annual saving of £345,000 for every foster place that prevents a child entering residential care. However, no guaranteed savings should be assumed at this stage.
- 8.3 The key financial risks are uncertainty over the final funding split, potential pooled budget contributions, transition costs, future sustainability once time-limited funding ends, and the cost of any workforce transfer or associated employment liabilities.

9. Legal Implications

- 9.1 The proposed model will require legal advice on governance, inter-authority agreements, data sharing, information governance, commissioning, employment arrangements and any TUPE implications.
- 9.2 Statutory responsibility for children looked after, fostering approvals, safeguarding, care planning and Agency Decision Maker decisions will remain with Torbay Council unless and until any formal delegation arrangements are lawfully agreed.
- 9.3 Any transfer of staff or functions must be supported by appropriate consultation, HR processes, equality considerations and legal agreements. The delegated authority sought in this report will enable the Director of Children's Services, in consultation with relevant statutory officers and the Cabinet Member, to progress and finalise these arrangements.

10. Engagement and Consultation

- 10.1 The regional design has been developed through engagement with local authorities, foster carers and operational leaders across the South West. Feedback has highlighted the importance of consistent, reliable relationships with supervising social workers, being treated as professional partners, prompt communication, clearer processes, peer support, and access to specialist training and support.
- 10.2 Torbay will need to undertake local engagement with foster carers, staff, trade unions, children and young people, and relevant partners as part of implementation. This will be particularly important because Torbay's existing relational fostering model is a local strength and must not be diluted through transition.

11. Procurement Implications

- 11.1 Procurement implications will depend on the final hub operating model. The regional costed plan includes potential procurement or commissioning activity relating to case management systems, digital and marketing activity, training delivery, independent social worker capacity, panel brokerage and programme support. Any procurement undertaken by or on behalf of Torbay will need to comply with the Council's Contract Procedures, the Procurement Act 2023, and social value requirements. Procurement advice will be required before any commitment is made to external suppliers or regional pooled arrangements.

12. Protecting our naturally inspiring Bay and tackling Climate Change

- 12.1 The proposal is not expected to have a significant direct environmental impact. Some activity, such as regional meetings, training, staff engagement and foster carer support, may involve travel across the South West. This will be mitigated by making best use of digital meetings and online training where appropriate, while recognising that some in-person engagement will be necessary to maintain relationships and support high-quality practice.

13. Associated Risks

- 13.1 The principal risks are:
- uncertainty over final costs and funding;
 - workforce disruption and TUPE implications;
 - loss of local relationships and practice strengths;
 - reduced local ownership;
 - delay in agreeing legal, HR and data-sharing arrangements;
 - dependence on regional systems and data quality;
 - and the risk that expected benefits do not materialise quickly.

- 13.2 These risks will be mitigated through a dedicated Torbay project team, phased implementation, formal governance, legal and financial due diligence, engagement with foster carers and staff, clear accountability arrangements, and regular reporting to senior leaders and Members.
- 13.3 There is also a risk in not joining: Torbay may lose access to funding, have less influence over the regional model, and miss opportunities to strengthen sufficiency and improve the fostering journey.

14. Equality Impact Assessment

Protected characteristics under the Equality Act and groups with increased vulnerability	Data and insight	Equality considerations (including any adverse impacts)	Mitigation activities	Responsible department and timeframe for implementing mitigation activities
Age	18% of Torbay residents are aged under 18 years old. 55% of Torbay residents are aged between 18 to 64 years old. 27% of Torbay residents are aged 65 and older.	The proposal is expected to have a positive impact on children and young people who need foster care by strengthening the availability, quality and consistency of family-based placements. Care will be needed to ensure that the model meets the needs of children of different ages, including teenagers, sibling groups and children with complex needs.	Implementation should include child-focused sufficiency planning and targeted recruitment for the children Torbay needs placements for, including older children, sibling groups and children with additional needs.	Children's Services, from project initiation through March 2027 and ongoing implementation.
Carers	- At the time of the 2021 census there were 14,900 unpaid carers in Torbay. 5,185 of these carers provided 50 hours or more of care.	Foster carers are directly affected by the proposal. The hub may improve access to training, peer networks, information and post-approval support. There is also a risk that carers experience the regional	Engage foster carers early, retain local relationship-based support, provide clear communication on what will change and what	Children's Services and project team, throughout transition and post go-live.

		model as more distant if local relationships are not protected.	will remain local, and build feedback loops into implementation.	
Care experienced	As of January 2026, there were 277 former care experienced young people aged 18-24 in Torbay.	Improved placement sufficiency and stability may positively impact children in care and care experienced young people by supporting more children to remain in family-based care and closer to their communities where appropriate.	Include care experienced young people and children in care in the design of support, communication and feedback arrangements where appropriate.	Children's Services and Participation, during implementation planning.
Disability	In the 2021 Census, 23.9% of Torbay residents answered that their day-to-day activities were limited a little or a lot by a physical or mental health condition or illness.	The hub should support accessible recruitment, assessment and training pathways for prospective foster carers and existing carers, including reasonable adjustments where needed. Children with disabilities and complex health needs are a key sufficiency consideration.	Ensure accessible communications, reasonable adjustments, and targeted recruitment and support for carers able to care for children with disabilities and complex needs.	Project team, Fostering Service and Equality leads, throughout implementation.
Gender reassignment	In the 2021 Census, 0.4% of Torbay's community answered that their gender identity was not the same	No differential impact		

	as their sex registered at birth.			
Marriage and civil partnership	Of those Torbay residents aged 16 and over at the time of 2021 Census, 44.2% of people were married or in a registered civil partnership.	No differential impact		
Pregnancy and maternity	- Between 2013 and 2024, the rate of live births (as a proportion of females aged 15 to 44) has been slightly but significantly higher in Torbay (average of 56.0 per 1,000) than the Southwest (53.4) and broadly in line with England (56.3). - For the period 2022 to 2024, rates in Torbay (44.6) have been significantly below England (50.0).	No differential impact		
Race	In the 2021 Census, 96.1% of Torbay residents described their ethnicity as the following: 1.6% as Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh 0.3% as Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African 1.5% as being of Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups	No differential impact		

	• 96.1% as White • 0.4% described their ethnicity another way. • Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic communities are more likely to live in areas of Torbay classified as being amongst the 20% most deprived areas in England.			
Religion and belief	The 2021 Census showed that the residents in Torbay identify their religion and/or belief as the following; • 48.5% are Christian • 0.4% are Buddhist • 0.2% are Hindu • 0.6% are Muslim • Less than 0.1% are Sikh • 0.1% are Jewish • 0.7% have another religion • 43.2% have no religion • 6.3% did not answer	No differential impact		
Sex	• 51.3% of Torbay's population are female. • 48.7% of Torbay's population are male.	No differential impact		
Sexual orientation	In the 2021 Census, residents described their sexuality as follows; • 89% as Straight or Heterosexual	No differential impact		

	• 1.7% as Gay or Lesbian • 1.1% as Bisexual • 0.1% as Pansexual • 0.1% described their sexuality another way • 7.4% of people didn't answer the question			
Armed Forces Community	• In 2021, 3.8% of residents in England reported that they had previously served in the UK armed forces. • In Torbay, 5.9% of the population have previously served in the UK armed forces.	No differential impact		
Additional considerations				
Socio-economic impacts (Including impacts on child poverty and deprivation)	• Torbay is ranked as the 39th most deprived upper tier local authority in England in the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2025.	No differential impact		
Public Health impacts (Including impacts on the general health of the population of Torbay)	• For the five-year period 2020 to 2024, data shows there is a 6-year life expectancy gap between males who live in Torbay's least and most deprived areas and, a 3-year gap for females.	No differential impact		
Human Rights impacts		No differential impact		

Child Friendly		This proposal supports Torbay’s child-friendly ambitions by aiming to increase the availability of safe, stable, family-based care and by strengthening foster carer support. Children and young people’s voice should shape implementation.	Build children and young people’s feedback into the project plan, including accessible engagement and a clear “you said, we did” feedback loop.	Children’s Services and Participation, from project mobilisation and throughout delivery.
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15. Cumulative Council Impact

- 15.1 The proposal links to wider Children's Services improvement, sufficiency planning, placement stability, corporate parenting and budget management activity. The cumulative impact should be positive if the hub strengthens fostering capacity and reduces reliance on higher-cost provision. However, implementation will need to be managed alongside other service improvement priorities to avoid placing unsustainable pressure on staff, carers and operational leaders.

16. Cumulative Community Impacts

- 16.1 There are no significant negative cumulative community impacts identified at this stage. The proposal has potential positive community impact by supporting more children to live in family-based care and by strengthening recruitment of foster carers locally and regionally. Wider pressures across the South West, including placement sufficiency, residential care costs and workforce capacity, will need to be monitored through the regional governance arrangements.