



Department
for Education



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**RE: DfE & NHSE FEEDBACK AGAINST DEEP DIVES / PROGRESS REVIEW
AGAINST LOCAL AREA PARTNERSHIP 5 PRIORITY ACTION AREAS**

The team were delighted to meet with you and colleagues across the Torbay Local Area Partnership on 16 July, to discuss progress made in responding to the Priority Action in the SEND inspection report that:

'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.'*

The discussion also included how the partnership has responded to recommendations in the inspection report regarding improving multi-agency work to prepare children and young people for adulthood, and to identify and support children at risk or who are missing out on their education.

We are grateful to all who contributed to such a valuable day, and who demonstrated the commitment, collaboration, and hard work that has gone into making the considerable progress since the SEND inspection.

The team would also like to express thanks to Combe Pafford school for warmly hosting the day, and to the young people at the Yellow Frog Café who provided such delicious refreshments. Our feedback is based on the presentations and materials you shared, and on the productive discussions held during the Deep Dive and the initial feedback session on 22 July.

Executive Summary

We feel the partnership is on track in responding to the recommendations in the inspection report and should be well positioned for the monitoring inspection.

Since inspection in March 2025, stronger multi-agency working has become evident across education, health and care services. We heard of the commitment to working collectively to identify and meet needs. There has been good progress in implementing the Partnership's Priority Impact Plan, which set out the required improvements to respond to the recommendations in the inspection report.

The majority of actions in the Plan have been implemented, and there is now increased focus on demonstrating the difference these improvements are making for children and young people with SEND. We heard examples of the positive impact of some of the improvements have already made. These impacts will become increasingly evident as the LAP continues to strengthen its evidence and narrative of improvement in the lead up to the monitoring inspection.

Key Findings

The Effective Use of the Graduated Response (PA 3)

The partnership has taken a number of positive measures to improve the application of the graduated response in education settings which have included:

- the creation of a new post the Head of Service for Quality First Teaching and School Improvement, to take a lead role in promoting the use of the graduated response in schools;
- the provision of training, practical support and advice to education settings, and advice through the Belonging by Design and outreach programmes;
- bringing in DfE-commissioned support, for instance, from the Council for Disabled Children, the National Development Team for Inclusion, and linking with the DfE's regional improvement for standards and excellence (RISE) initiative, which offers support to schools;
- the introduction of the speech and language therapy balanced model;
- a survey to understand the barriers to schools adopting the graduated response, in order to inform future planning.

The partnership has been able to demonstrate increased engagement in the graduated response from both early years settings and schools, through their participation in briefing and training sessions. Levels of engagement from schools still vary, but to a lesser extent, and the partnership has plans in place to sustain the progress made. In December, the LAP will host its first SEND conference, at which schools will be able to develop their own OAIP self-evaluation tool, further demonstrating a sector-led approach.

The co-designed locality model pilot, focused on Speech, Language and Communication Needs, and a good approach to its evaluation, provide strong examples of impact generated via increased schools' engagement. 29 of 31 targeted primary schools participated, as well as 5 early years settings. There have been positive impacts for children and young people and their families as result of the use of Linked Speech Therapists, Educational Psychology teams, earlier intervention pathways, and more consistent identification and support.

The capital strategy is designed to develop a range of provision: support bases and specialist places in mainstream schools, alongside an increase in the number of places in special schools for children with autism.

Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) - timeliness and accuracy in reflecting need, next steps, and provision for children and young people (PA 3)

In 2025, the very significant level of requests for EHCPs (above the national average) presented a substantial challenge to Torbay in providing timely EHC Needs Assessments and EHCPs. The local area's performance in issuing EHCPs within 20 weeks was below the national average in 2025, and in the first quarter of 2026. However, we saw that action taken by leaders to address the challenge is having a positive impact, with the proportion of plans issued within 20 weeks in quarter 2 of 2026 rising above the national average for 2025. We note that during 2025, the average number of weeks taken to issue a plan in Torbay was comparable to the average for England, and better than the average for the South West as a region. We were also pleased to see that that no plans took more than 52 weeks to complete, compared with a national average of 11%. There is strong performance in the completion of EHCP phase transfer reviews; in the spring of 2026, for instance, the local area partnership achieved 100% compliance with the statutory deadlines.

The Torbay local area partnership has also strengthened multi-agency EHCP quality assurance processes, including quality checks before an EHCP is issued, and post-issue audits of a sample of plans to identify areas for improvement. These audits demonstrate improvement in quality over time – something echoed by school representatives – and they have helpfully identified areas for further improvement. These areas for improvement include, notably, the health and social care sections and the provision section of EHCPs. It will be important for the partnership to make improvements in these areas during the autumn term 2026, as weaknesses in these sections of EHCPs were highlighted in the SEND inspection report.

In response to the concern in the inspection report that EHCPs were not adequately preparing children and young people for their next steps, the LAP has developed a revised 0-25 EHCP template, co-designed with young people, aimed at strengthening the Preparing for Adulthood content and increased the focus on outcomes, next steps, and transition planning. We saw evidence that forward planning for significant life transitions is

increasingly reflected in plans. The significant reduction in the number of young people with EHCPs who are not in education, employment and training is a positive impact of this work. This progress is, however, more difficult to see from the grading system used for assessing the quality of EHCP improvements in PfA content. It will also be important to demonstrate that Section E of all EHCPs include (as required by the SEND Code of Practice) *'forward plans for key changes in a child or young person's life, such as changing schools, moving from children's to adult care and/or from paediatric services to adult health, or moving on from further education to adulthood'*.¹

Reducing Levels of Suspension and Exclusion from Secondary Schools (PA 3)

Since the SEND inspection, DfE figures published in July 2026 for the 2024/25 academic year have shown that Torbay's permanent exclusion rate for secondary schools was below the averages for both England and the South West. Torbay's suspension rate for secondary school pupils is similar, with the LA below the average for the South West, and with only one of its ten close children's services neighbours² at a lower rate.

Torbay is aware that the exclusion and suspension rates from primary schools is much higher than national averages. It has also identified a concern over the relatively high levels of exclusion of children with EHCPs. The local area partnership has therefore rightly taken the decision to broaden the focus of its work beyond secondary level. It has commissioned a review of the exclusion of pupils with EHCPs, to try to identify what measures are most needed to avoid them.

The support that Lodestar Academy has been providing to mainstream schools operates within a strong evaluation framework, with evidence of the initiative having a positive impact on reducing levels of suspension and exclusion.

We note that the proposed secondary risk of exclusion work was discontinued, as schools wished to focus on the Regional Improvement for Standards and Excellence (RISE) work commissioned by the DfE on using powers under section 29 of the Education Act 2002 to direct a pupil off site for their education with a view to improving their behaviour, and in-year school managed move arrangements, as a way of reducing exclusion. It will be helpful for the local area partnership to be able to provide details of the outcomes from this initiative during its inspection.

Improving Preparation for Adulthood Arrangements (PA 5)

Torbay has responded positively to the recommendation in the inspection report that the partnership should improve their oversight and strengthen joint working across services to

¹ SEND Code of Practice (2015), p. 166.

² The ten children's services authorities in England with the most similar profile of needs to that of Torbay are Tameside, Sunderland, Plymouth, Rotherham, Redcar and Cleveland, Isle of Wight, Barnsley, Gateshead, Rochdale, and Telford and Wrekin.

support preparation for adulthood arrangements in several key areas.

Transitions from child to adult health services

A number of measures have been taken to improve the way that child and adult services are joined up across all health services for children and young people with SEND, so that the journey into adult health services is easier and more accessible. These include:

- improved governance and oversight through the Children and Family Health Devon transitions steering group, covering physical health, learning disability, mental health and neurodiversity pathways;
- use of recent NHSE guidance to improve practice in a number of services and the inclusion of transition pathways in provider contracts;
- ensuring that transition planning is taking place earlier, with a clear expectation that planning begins by Year 9 and, in some services, from age 11-14. Occupational Therapy services have embedded transition planning from age 14 through collaboration with Adult Social Care teams, and there is a process in place to identify young people who may need transition support and were not previously known to social care. This work is subject to increased quality assurance processes, which includes auditing to inform future practice and training;
- improvements in information and advice to help:
 - families navigate the transition pathways;
 - young people develop skills in independence and managing their health needs.

The partnership was able to illustrate impact by comparing the typical experience of a young person at the time of the inspection versus now, and via feedback from families and young people.

Transitions from child to adult social care

Measures have been taken to improve transitions to adult social care, including:

- adult social care staff attending EHCP reviews where a young person is likely to have eligible needs under the Care Act 2024;
- transition panels to oversee transition planning in the areas such as current placements and support packages, joint work between child and adult services, issues relating to Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards and the Mental Capacity Act; joint working between a young person's social worker and their personal advisor, and preparation for independence;
- training of staff in Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards and the Mental Capacity Act.
- Improvement to information, such as Year 9 information packs and information on direct payment.

As a result of these changes, the partnership was able to report transition planning starting earlier and better co-ordination between services.

Post 16 education training and employment

In the areas of post-16 education, training and employment, increased partnership working across services, education providers and employers is evident.

The partnership now provides enhanced oversight, reviews and support for young people with EHCPs who are not in education employment or training (NEET). As a result, the number of 16-25 year olds who are NEET decreased by 55% between January 2026 and July 2026. Furthermore, the proportion of young people whose destination is 'Not Known' reduced from 2.4% to 1.2%, without a corresponding increase in NEET figures, indicating more proactive tracking and engagement. We note that recent data published by the DfE³ shows that the proportion of 16 and 17 years olds with SEND who are NEET is below the average for Torbay's close children's services neighbours.

We also heard of strong progress that has been made in employment pathways. Supported internships have increased by 500% through NDTi-funded work, with 80% of NHS internship participants moving into paid employment. Innovative programmes such as the UKSPF-funded Sound Futures, King's Trust 'Eat That Frog', the SEND Employment Forum and work experience partnerships have broadened participation opportunities for those with SEND and who are at risk of being NEET. For example, Sound Futures (hosted by Sound Communities) supported 75 young people aged 16-24 who were NEET, and reported high levels of engagement and a number of positive outcomes for young people. Partnership working with South Devon College has created additional curriculum opportunities through the development of the pathways into adult programme.

Children at risk of missing out on their education

In the time available, we were unable to discuss in detail the multi-agency support for children and young people at risk of missing out on their education through poor attendance, part-time timetables, missing education altogether, exclusion and suspension, inappropriate elective home education, or poor commissioning arrangements for alternative provision. However, we noted:

- the significant improvements in the commissioning and quality assurance of providers of education other than at school, and alternative providers not registered with the DfE as schools, aimed at ensuring compliance with standards and ensuring that provision meets needs;
- the recent reductions in numbers of pupils on part-time timetables;

³ [Participation in education, training and employment: 2025 - GOV.UK](#) (July 2026)

- the recent reduction in number of children at SEND support who are electively home educated;
- improvements in attendance of pupils at SEND support in most education settings, but a small number of schools with high absence rates;
- the focus on reducing exclusion and suspension rates in primary schools, which are higher than in similar areas in England;
- evidence of positive impacts in attendance and suspension and exclusion rates in schools that have received targeted support.

Next Steps & Recommendations

In summary, the partnership has made good progress towards meeting its targets across Priority Area 3 and the areas for improvement relating to preparing for adulthood and children missing out on their education. There is early evidence of impact that can be built upon during the autumn term. In particular, we suggest that the work on impact focuses on:

- (i) evidencing the improvements in the social care, health and provision sections of new and reviewed EHCPs, and ensuring that they include the arrangements for supporting transitions;
- (ii) the initiatives taken in secondary schools to reduce exclusion and suspensions, and initiatives to reduce the exclusion of pupils with EHCPs;
- (iii) ensuring there is a strong evidence base to demonstrate the improvements made in multi-agency and partnership work and pathways to identify and support children at risk of missing out on their education.

We would also encourage the local area partnership to ensure that the improvements in multi-agency pathways (particularly in the areas of preparing for adulthood, and children at risk of missing out on their education) are included in the local offer. This will help families to become aware of the enhanced support now available to them, and how to access it.

Please do continue working with your SEND and NHS England Advisers, Brian Gale and Mark Tucker, and Mohamed Jimale as your DfE Case Lead, who will all continue to provide you with support and challenge.

If you have any questions or require any further support, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Yours sincerely,



Salam Katbi
Head of Vulnerable Children's Unit, South West Region's Group