

28th June 2012

Mr Richard Williams
Director of Children's Services
Torbay Council

Dear Mr Williams

DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENT OF TORBAY ADOPTION SERVICES

Thank you for agreeing to take part in the diagnostic assessment which has been developed to support local authorities to explore how delay can be minimised for children who need permanence through adoption. Your local authority was offered this opportunity to be part of the Children's Improvement Board (CIB) initiative as the timescales between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, and between obtaining court authority and matching a child with an adoptive family, are outside the three year averages for England local authorities and greater than those of your statistical neighbour local authorities (as reported in the DfE Adoption Scorecards).

The Outcomes UK and BAAF consultants were onsite at Torbay Children's Services from 18th – 22nd June 2012. The team was led by Marion Davis (Outcomes UK Associate) and she was joined by myself for the first day and by Julie Cooke (BAAF Associate) for 4 days.

We are very grateful to all those involved for making themselves available to us at such short notice and in particular would like to thank the small team who responded to our administrative needs and supplied files, documents and other information very willingly and efficiently. It was also extremely helpful to be able to communicate very regularly with key senior managers and test out our findings so that when we gave our feedback presentation on the final day of the diagnostic assessment there should have been no surprises.

Methodology

The team had advance access to publicly available documents such as Ofsted inspection reports, the Children's Partnership Improvement Plan (CPIP) and the Torbay Adoption Scorecard. You provided us with your recent review of the Torbay Adoption Service with its Priorities and Action Plan for the service and for the Adoption Panel. Torbay identified advance 4 key lines of enquiry; our findings in respect of these are woven into the text of this letter

1. Measuring timeliness: how Torbay measures adoption performance and collects data.
2. Integrated pathway for Looked After Children: understanding when adoption becomes part of a child's plan and how plans are worked towards effectively.
3. Infrastructure of the Adoption Service: identifying appropriate structures, strategy deficits, policy, procedures and processes.
4. Recruitment and assessment of adopters in Torbay: clarifying timescales, strategy and recruitment of sufficient and appropriate adopters.

On the first morning senior managers presented an overview of the story behind the Adoption Scorecard.

During the week we were able to meet with managers and staff from Safeguarding and Family Support, Permanence, Adoption and Adoption Support, Recruitment, Training and Assessment (Fostering and Adoption), Safeguarding and Reviewing Teams, Commissioning and Performance, Legal Services, and the Medical Adviser (and temporary Chair) of the Adoption Panel. We also spoke with several adopters and were able to undertake some case file reading. We were also pleased to meet with Cllr Chris Lewis, Lead Member for Children's Services.

After making a presentation on the final day, the diagnostic assessment team led a brief workshop, following which senior managers worked on a response to our diagnosis which is included in this letter.

KEY FINDINGS

It is important to locate our findings in the context of Torbay Children's Services recent history. Following the Ofsted Safeguarding and Looked After Children inspection of November 2010 which resulted in an overall judgement of "Inadequate", the Council's Children's Services became subject to intervention, has seen the departure of the former Director of Children's Services and other key staff, and is currently having to manage a vacancy rate in excess of 40%, including front line and management posts.

The diagnostic assessment team was given a searingly honest picture of the challenges that Children's Social Care faces and the precedence that the remedial actions in safeguarding have taken. Although a few staff told us they had perceived shortcomings in the Adoption Service for some time, the majority appear to have been taken by surprise by the picture that the Adoption Scorecard revealed of significant delays for children being placed for adoption and that Torbay's performance compares so unfavourably with its family of statistical neighbours. This formerly low profile for adoption can probably be attributable to

the understandable priority that safeguarding improvement has required and the historically poor quality of data and performance management.

The Local Authority should be credited for the speed with which it has responded over recent weeks to accelerate plans and bring in additional capacity. The commitment to improvement from the political and managerial leadership is strongly evident. Last month the Council underwent a Local Government Association (LGA) Safeguarding Peer Review which recorded evidence of decisive action and coherent planning and an enthusiastic attention to the delivery of improvement.

Some staff have described publication of the Adoption Scorecard as a “wake-up call” and “a jolt” and the analysis that has followed has accurately identified where the main causes of delay occur within Children’s Social Council are and the looked after children system and does not seek to displace this onto external agencies. The quality of data appears to have been of a poor quality for some years making it difficult for the local authority to easily discern the extent of the problem and track performance.

The leadership team has taken management action in respect of poor performance, is explicit about a “no blame” culture and is trying hard to focus on the future rather than the past.

1. OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN, BIRTH PARENTS AND ADOPTERS

Torbay’s CPIP states it focuses on establishing “an integrated service delivery model that is based on clear pathways and coherent arrangements for children, young people and families that will deliver better outcomes for those in greatest need.” Actually much of Torbay’s improvement planning focus is on getting the basic processes and procedures right rather than an explicit outcomes approach that measures impact for children. However staff are starting to talk about “the child’s journey” and the newly developed performance management framework includes qualitative information regarding outcomes for children. Overall it was difficult for the diagnostic assessment team to find detailed data that identified trends and outcomes.

Elected members have all undertaken corporate parenting training in which young people participated and this is believed to have helped in raising the place of the child at the centre and to have maintained the commitment to additional funding for Children’s Services.

A well-regarded family group conferencing scheme works actively with children and families to identify best solutions and has the potential, if extended (to all children at the edge of care) to contribute to progressing faster to permanence plans.

There is a need for a more strongly evidence-based approach to guide planning to consider effective permanent options at an earlier stage and thus avoid delay for children in this part of the process. There do appear to sometimes be delays in progressing cases to court proceedings. Although court processes are currently completed at average national timescales, this could deteriorate as the volume of proceedings is rising.

Once cases have progressed towards Adoption Panel there is commitment to avoiding delay with additional meetings held if necessary. In discussion with two Adoption Panel members and with the Adoption Team Manager it became clear that active work is now underway to address the historical delay between placement order and matching. Over the past three months the Panel has noted cases of earlier matching of children with adopters.

The adopters we spoke to were very positive about the initial response they received from Torbay (for one this was in contrast to their contact with another Adoption Agency), with the information they received and the swift progression to preparation groups and assessment. From this small sample it appears that a high number of home visits (12 – 14) were made to the prospective adopters, (potential for streamlining) but they were generally satisfied with the process and most applications are presented to Panel within recommended timescales.

There is a range of post-adoption support available to children, adopters and support to birth family members with contact arrangements but the shape and scope of adoption support needs better definition. At present the counselling of adult adoptees is not prioritised with a backlog of people seeking access to birth records and counselling waiting up to a year so long term outcomes of adoptions may not be known.

2. VISION, STRATEGY AND LEADERSHIP

There is now a new leadership team in place (though not all are permanent appointments) who acknowledge that there is much to do to improve the adoption service, and they understand the urgency and scale of the task. An Action Plan has been drawn up by a recently recruited interim Service Manager. It is a strong analysis, is comprehensive in terms of a range of actions that will ensure the Council is compliant with regulations and guidance and has policies and procedures that are fit for purpose, and has set appropriately demanding deadlines.

However the vision and strategy for adoption needs to be clearly articulated, prioritised and led by the Director of Children's Services and by the Executive Head, Safeguarding & Well Being, together with the Lead Member for Children's Services. The diagnostic assessment team's view was that this senior team is committed to providing the necessary leadership and are heading in the right direction.

The diagnostic assessment team were told by many people they met that they were confused by the structure of Children's Services and unclear about how responsibility for children's plans and outcomes progressed through the various parts. During the course of the week adjustments were still being made to the structure and the "final" version we saw seemed much more coherent and supported. However it needs to be quickly communicated as the settled structure with a rationale for the roles and responsibilities people have within it.

There is also a need for senior managers to better articulate the vision for the Adoption Service, perhaps through drawing a "road map" that describes what the service will look like and what it will achieve for children, and guides staff in getting there and knowing when they have succeeded. Further development and intelligent use of the recently developed data set will support this journey.

It felt to the diagnostic assessment team as though there is a "window of opportunity" with staff now feeling more confident in the leadership of Children's Services with some describing it as an "exciting" or "dynamic" time. This opportunity needs to be grasped so that the feeling some have of being "in flux" is removed and the commitment of staff maximised. This will be a demanding task whilst the level of vacancies and agency staff remain high. Torbay is somewhat unusual in having social work vacancies in its specialist teams. Tackling recruitment and retention at front line and management levels is a priority and Torbay has recently engaged a private sector partner to assist in recruiting to key posts.

3. WORKING TOGETHER

Within the Council there are examples of supportive relationships within Children's Services including adoption and we heard of good collaborative working with partners such as health and CAF/CASS at strategic and practice levels. Traditionally relationships with the courts are good but these will need nurturing in the face of increased workloads. The Head of Legal Services regularly attends Family Court Business Meetings and seeks to involve relevant colleagues from Children's Services.

Torbay uses Parents & Children Together (PACT) for inter-country adoption, is part of the South West Adoption Consortium, has a reciprocal arrangement with 3 other local

authorities for using adopters and has recently visited one of its statistical neighbour local authorities with better outcomes in adoption. Senior staff told us that they were committed to learning from and developing and sharing best practice with neighbour authorities. Relationships throughout the South West Adoption Consortium are strong and reciprocal

There is still room for a stronger outward-facing culture to maximise learning from good practice. Torbay is committed to exploring this dimension and working with improvement support from the CIB or elsewhere.

The team came across some examples of where other parts of the Council might be able to offer more support to the adoption service, including in IT and finance. One skill that is greatly needed is some specific marketing and communications input to raise the effectiveness of recruitment of prospective adopters and foster carers, which would also free up professional social work time for family finding and placement support.

One area that needs tackling is working together across teams involved in planning for children so that the potential loss of momentum and changes in relationships that can occur at transitions between teams is minimised. There are multiple points in the system at present where delay could occur if an integrated permanency planning pathway is not implemented and well understood.

The separation of case-holding responsibilities from the family finding role is to be welcomed, as is the combination of the IRO role with conference chairing and the reconfigured Safeguarding and Reviewing Service has the potential and the determination to assist with and quality assure planning.

At an improvement planning level Torbay has made an important decision to ensure that the Action Plan for adoption is integrated with the overall CPIP, but with a specific project covering adoption so that the focus on this specialist area and monitoring its performance is not lost.

4. MANAGING RESOURCES

Torbay's Children's Services have been stretched by the rise in the number of children subject to child protection plans and looked after, and elected members have demonstrated their commitment to improvement by investing additional budget in the service.

Adoption is a cost-effective way for local authorities to deliver good outcomes for children in comparison to remaining in care for long periods. It is therefore vital that the resources are directed into the front end of the system to a) identify the right children at the right time for whom adoption (or another form of permanence) is the right plan and b) to actively recruit a larger pool of adopters who match the needs of children likely to require placement.

Finally in this section, data is a resource that requires better management, to accurately reflect activity, communicate performance trends, spot issues earlier and drive improvement. Many people, including the diagnostic assessment team, experienced problems with PARIS (the Council's electronic record and IT system) and the fact that much of the work of the adoption service is not incorporated onto the system needs addressing. Difficulties in using the PARIS system meant that the diagnostic team were unable, in the time available; to complete as systematic and comprehensive a set of case file audits as would have been desirable.

5. SERVICE DELIVERY, WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AND EFFECTIVE PRACTICE

Through talking to staff and the team's limited case file reading (some paper and some electronic files) we came across a number of examples of good practice but we are unsure how well learning is shared. We also however picked up examples of delays for some children in the early stages of planning and for others at the family finding stage.

The authority is now much clearer about where the shortfalls in service delivery are and is committed to change and measurable improvement. Once delays in adoption were widely identified there has been a lot of work to speed up the process for a backlog of children's plans. However the starting level is low and requires a sustained focus at many points in the system. Activity to update policies, procedures and processes is urgent and will give staff more confidence in their practice, but longer term success will depend very much on how effectively the permanent workforce can be strengthened and supported.

Recruitment of qualified and experienced social workers and managers is the first step but retention needs to be improved through providing staff with greater certainty about roles, the tools to do the job with and the investment in practice detailed in the Munro Review.

The Adoption Panel is a key element in improving Torbay's Adoption Service and has suffered from the loss of its Chair and other important members. It needs to be reconstructed and its membership and processes strengthened if it is to promote effective adoption practice and provide the appropriate element of challenge to the system. We are pleased that during our week in Torbay an experienced interim Chair was

appointed to the Panel and that plans are underway for recruitment of a permanent chair and other members. An urgent matter outstanding is the identification of the professional adviser to the Adoption Panel.

KEY AREAS FOR CONSIDERATION

The team delivered a full presentation to approximately 30 staff and partners on the last day of the diagnostic assessment listing “Strengths” and “Areas for Consideration” under each of the 5 headings above. The response suggested that our diagnosis was recognised and that people are willing to address the challenges. This honesty and openness is an important first step but there is a real urgency and a number of fronts on which to balance attention if children’s progress to permanence is to pick up the pace it needs to deliver better outcomes for them in the longer term.

We identified some key practical, systemic and cultural areas for urgent consideration:

1. Lead and communicate a compelling vision for adoption in Torbay
2. Quickly finalise the new structure, clarify roles within it and support it by
 - urgently take steps to raise recruitment and retention
 - collect best practice procedures and processes manuals from elsewhere and disseminate them
 - promote enquiring use of data and provide the tools to performance manage effectively
 - reform and strengthen the Adoption Panel.
3. Don’t lose the focus on adoption within the wider safeguarding improvement agenda
4. Avoid fragmentation by devising an integrated pathway that focuses on the child’s journey and achieving the best possible outcomes for Torbay’s children.

A workshop was held on the last day of the week and the local authority’s response to the diagnostic assessment was as follows:

Vision, strategy and leadership

- Create a clear service vision plan and critical pathway for the Adoption Service
- Clearly define service structure to include detailed individual roles and responsibilities
- Create an additional project and work packages for adoption within the CPIP framework

- Create a communication and marketing strategy

Service Delivery and effective practice

- To develop and implement an integrated permanency planning pathway across Children's Services
- Ensure that a permanency plan is created at the 2nd statutory review in line with twin tracking protocol
- Develop and implement practice standards, guidance, policy and procedures for the adoption service
- Reconstitute the Adoption Panel with the guidance and regulations ensuring the legality and compliance
- To raise the profile and integration of the Adoption Panel within the wider service
- Create and implement an outcomes and impact evaluation measurement tool
- Develop an outward facing learning culture which takes account of good practice models and national research

Workforce Development and Re-modelling

- Implement recruitment and retention strategy
- Implement training and development plan
- Re-model the family placement service
- Re-launch and fully implement recent legislative and regulatory changes
- Complete a core skills analysis of all staff within the service
- Ensure that there is an effective contribution from partnership agencies

Performance Managing

- Fully implement the performance managing strategy including a supervision policy
- Create additional or re-engineer existing Business systems structures and processes
- To review PARIS functions and capacity to ensure the completion of the data / information required for the Adoption Service
- To create a core data set for the Adoption Service
- Review and implement any outstanding recommendations from the 2009 Ofsted inspection report

The Council's plan seems to be accurately focused and conveys an understanding of the challenges to be tackled. In order to engage the necessary groups of staff the Council may wish to consider holding a series of development days, including a wider conference that would include key partners (e.g. Health, Courts, CAFCASS) so as to raise the profile of adoption, learn from research and best practice and give attention to some specific topics

that can reduce delays such as improved family finding and a development of twin tracking and concurrent planning.

These are areas which could well benefit from sector-led improvement opportunities within the region.

This diagnostic assessment was intended to achieve a balance of support and challenge and felt collaborative in spirit and that a good degree of agreement was reached about what is needed to improve the service.

We would therefore like to acknowledge the work already started, hope that our contribution has helped cement your commitment and accelerate improvement. We wish you well in the future.

Yours sincerely

Seamus Jennings
Senior Consultant, Outcomes UK