

# Inspection of Torbay local authority children's services

**Inspection dates:** 21 March to 1 April 2022

**Lead inspector:** Andy Whippey, Her Majesty's Inspector

<b>Judgement</b>	<b>Grade</b>
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Services for children in Torbay have significantly improved. This improvement is demonstrable and making a tangible difference for Torbay's children. Strong political and corporate commitment to the improvement agenda has enabled the local authority to change the trajectory of social work practice so that services in Torbay are now good. This is an impressive achievement.

Strategic partnerships are now strong and there is good communication across both corporate and operational management. Despite this improvement, local authority senior leaders are not complacent. They have a strong awareness not only of what is being done well, but of areas of practice in which they could do better for children. Such areas include clearer expectations of workers when care leavers live in emergency accommodation and greater consistency of supervision and management oversight.

A highly effective approach to recruitment and retention has enabled the creation of a largely stable permanent workforce. As a result, manageable caseloads now enable stronger and more constructive relationships to be built with most children and families.

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## **What needs to improve?**

- The oversight of arrangements when care leavers move in and out of temporary accommodation.
- The focus on reading in personal education plans.
- The quality of planning for some children in need.
- The frequency and quality of management oversight.

## **The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: good**

1. A radical transformation and development of early help services mean that children and families in Torbay benefit from responsive, well-coordinated, universal and targeted early help services that help to reduce harm and to promote children's welfare. Good-quality assessments are overseen by experienced early help managers. A 'team around the family' model delivers a holistic, multi-agency perspective on families' needs. This is making a difference to most children's lives, as it prevents risks escalating. The weekly multidisciplinary early help panel ensures that most children get the right level of help at the right time.
2. When children's needs or risks to their well-being increase, they are referred to the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). Clear and well-established systems provide timely and effective management oversight of referrals. The co-location of early help coordinators with professionals from partner agencies who have a responsibility for safeguarding adds value, leading to swift and proportionate threshold decisions. Workers in the MASH are clear about their roles and responsibilities. Most children receive the right level of help and support at the right time. Consent is sought from families when checks with partner agencies are necessary. Mature partnership arrangements in the MASH help to ensure that relevant information is shared swiftly.
3. Referral pathways are clear, with effective collaboration across teams and services. This is a significant improvement since Ofsted's last inspection. Robust checks with other agencies ensure that children at higher risk are prioritised quickly. Children at risk of criminal or sexual exploitation or of going missing from home are assessed using specifically designed assessment tools. Subsequent swift action reduces risks, supporting families to make positive changes.
4. Child protection strategy meetings are timely and well attended by relevant partner agencies. Effective information-sharing results in the right decisions being made for children. Those at immediate risk of significant harm receive a prompt, proportionate and, in most cases, effective response. Child protection investigations are detailed and consider information from partner agencies, family history and immediate risks and concerns. In most cases, there is good evidence of management oversight and clear case direction. Most children are

seen quickly, and safety planning and contingency plans are considered when needed.

5. Child protection conferences take place within appropriate timescales and respectful work by social workers using restorative approaches supports parents to be engaged well in the process. Most child protection plans are detailed, with a good focus on children's outcomes and the actions required to achieve them. Most work with children and families is purposeful. Workers take the time to get to know children well, visiting often to see children at home or in school and seeing them alone when this is appropriate. Core groups are timely and well attended by a good range of relevant professionals, but the plan is not consistently updated in response to progress made. Children are supported to contribute to meetings about them, either by attending themselves or ensuring that their views are shared in other ways.
6. Assessment and planning are effective and timely for most children. Social workers demonstrate good skills and professional curiosity in trying to understand and evidence what children and their parents or carers are telling them. Social workers do well at engaging and assessing the parenting strengths and weaknesses of fathers and male partners as well as mothers. Stronger assessments, often carried out using Torbay's restorative model of social work practice, explore effectively the impact on children of parental mental illness, domestic abuse and substance misuse. Social workers sensitively evaluate the impact that these and other vulnerabilities have on parents, but keep a clear focus on children's need to stay safe. Most assessments are comprehensive and of good quality and include a family history. Children are seen regularly, and workers seek to gain their views about their lived experiences. Some direct work is powerful in enabling children to express their lived experiences, for example in pictorial ways, and this is an important tool in understanding the harm they are suffering and ensuring that effective action is taken to address it.
7. Bespoke direct-work tools are helping children with complex needs, including some of the most vulnerable and exploited adolescents, to manage their behaviours and to express their views. Plans and planning are improving and all children in need have a current plan in place. The majority of plans are reviewed regularly to track progress. Most plans identify children's most important needs and the key risks to them, although some are not updated following significant events or changes to children's circumstances. The quality of this child in need work is not consistent for all disabled children. This means that a small number of children are experiencing delay in making progress in line with their assessed needs. However, inspectors did not identify any children left in situations of significant risk.
8. Rigorous monitoring and tracking of children subject to the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline is preventing drift and ensuring timely decisions about applications to family courts. Plainly written, authoritative and sensitive letters to parents explicitly outline what needs to happen. When necessary,

legal proceedings are initiated quickly to ensure that children are not subject to neglect or living with other damaging home conditions for too long.

9. Effective multi-agency work led by the homeless and poverty prevention team has enhanced professional understanding about the impact of poverty and neglect on Torbay's children. For example, joint working by housing officers and housing providers has recently prevented 16 families with children from being evicted from their homes.
10. Targeted work has enhanced the impact of practice by ensuring that all out-of-hours staff have been trained in the local authority's social care practice model. The creation of an edge of care service has reduced the number of children entering care in an emergency. Staff in this service now feel valued, as leaders are responsive and solution focused. Inspectors saw examples of recent tenacious work by police, health and the edge of care social care team helping to prevent harm to children.
11. When children are identified as being at risk of criminal or sexual exploitation, there is a well-coordinated and robust response. Multi-agency meetings are identifying risk well and prompt action is taken. Dedicated exploitation workers ensure a focus on the specialist needs of individual children.
12. The local authority designated officer is experienced, well informed and well connected to a wide range of partner agencies. This helps to ensure a robust response to allegations against professionals and the effective protection of children.
13. For children aged 16 and 17 who are homeless, joint housing assessments that consider support needs and accommodation options effectively are ensuring an appropriate response.
14. There are low numbers of children who are privately fostered. For most of these children, there is an effective response to ensure that their living arrangements are assessed and supported appropriately.
15. There is a robust system for the oversight of children who are electively home educated (EHE). Due to the increase in EHE since the beginning of the pandemic, the local authority has increased the capacity to oversee the potential risks to those children for whom EHE is not the best option. The team makes clear to parents the expectations on them to provide effective home education and provides relevant support. However, the voice of the child is not consistently apparent in these discussions. The team is alert to any safeguarding concerns raised regarding pupils whose parents or carers are considering EHE. The team works closely with relevant agencies to protect children and uses statutory powers when necessary.
16. There are clear and robust systems for identifying, tracking and locating children missing education (CME). The CME team works well with other agencies within children's services and beyond to ensure that these children are located, and that action is taken to help to ensure their safety.

17. The CME team works in close partnership with other agencies to identify potential CME issues before they occur. The establishment of secondary and primary peer groups enables the CME team to liaise closely with schools to identify pupils at risk of exclusion and determine preventative strategies. The team's focus is to return these pupils to mainstream school, using the additional support of the educational psychologist and outreach team.

## **The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: good**

18. Children in care are seen and seen alone regularly by their social workers, who work hard to build meaningful relationships, often using creative ways to engage and communicate with them. This is ensuring that children's voices are heard and that their views are informing planning. Not all children have effective life-story work carried out to help them understand their history and circumstances.
19. Children return to their parents' care when it is safe for them to do so. Good consideration is given to children's wishes, to the level of risk and to the support required to give the return home the greatest chance of success. Family time is encouraged and supported to ensure that children maintain links with their family and people important to them. When children cannot remain with their parents, other family members are considered and assessed to enable children to continue to live with their extended family whenever possible.
20. For most children, permanent homes are being found in a timely manner. Children benefit from timely adoptions or placements with special guardians and connected carers. Early permanence and parallel planning are very well considered, foster to adopt is well established and a number of children have benefited from such arrangements. Staff are tenacious in finding adoptive families for children, including older children with additional needs.
21. When family arrangements are not possible, most children live in alternative stable placements that meet their needs well and where they are making good progress. Children's needs are well considered when matching and placing them with foster carers. When placements are at risk of breakdown, effective additional support is provided by the edge of care team and stability meetings are held to consider what other support can be provided to help make placements more resilient.
22. The right support and interventions are in place for most children in care to enable them to flourish. Most children's care plans contain the right actions to promote progress for children. Children's plans are regularly monitored through timely reviews. Most independent reviewing officers contact children just before their review and maintain relationships with them.
23. Health assessments are completed in a timely manner and good use is made of them in plans for children. The assessments, carried out by healthcare

professionals, contain clearly recorded discussions with children about their health needs. Children in care are supported with leisure and enrichment opportunities, which promote their well-being and enhance their peer relationships.

24. The virtual school is highly responsive to the needs of children in care and uses the Pupil Premium Plus funds judiciously. All schools are extremely positive about the role of the virtual school. They say that the school provides excellent training, with a very strong focus on trauma-informed practice, which has enhanced the provision for all pupils in some schools. The headteacher and the governing body of the virtual school have a good oversight of the attainment and attendance of children looked after.
25. Personal education plans identify pupils' social, emotional and academic needs effectively. Targets are set and reviewed in a timely manner. However, it is not always clear who will be responsible for the implementation of agreed actions. In addition, for many pupils who have missed periods of education, whether due to the pandemic or other reasons, there is not a sufficiently coherent and systematic focus on literacy, particularly reading. The focus on reading is vital if such pupils are to learn confidently and successfully.
26. Assessments of foster carers are timely and generally of good quality. Foster carers spoken to by inspectors commented positively about the ease and timeliness with which they can access support, including out of office hours. All foster carers spoken with were highly positive about the support that they receive from their supervising social workers. Supervising social workers have achieved a good balance between professional vigilance and challenge and providing support to foster carers.
27. Care leavers are well supported by dedicated personal advisers who work hard to keep in touch with them and offer the support that they need, when they need it. This includes care leavers who are aged over 21. The local authority is in meaningful contact with the vast majority of care leavers. When this is not the case, determined efforts are made to re-establish contact.
28. The move to introduce personal advisers for all care leavers at age 16 has been well received. While not consistent, this has enabled some care leavers to build valued supportive relationships with their workers prior to the personal adviser taking on key-worker responsibility when the young person turns 18. This has enabled care leavers to be better prepared for the challenges and opportunities of adulthood.
29. A high number of care leavers are in higher education, with young people actively encouraged and supported to embark on such journeys. When care leavers are not in education, employment or training, personal advisers actively focus on trying to engage these young people in such activities. The local authority recognises it has more to do to expand opportunities for all care leavers to find employment, apprenticeships and enriching opportunities in the wider council and in private industries and businesses in Torbay.

30. Some pathway plans do not consistently involve young people in their creation and are not updated in response to a significant change in circumstances. The majority of care leavers do know what actions are being taken as a result of their pathway plans and are making measurable progress against pathway plan objectives.
31. There is a range of supported accommodation for care leavers. Shortages in supply have meant that a very small number of care leavers have been placed in bed and breakfast accommodation. Oversight of these arrangements is not sufficiently robust, particularly in terms of visiting arrangements and supporting young people with everyday needs. During the inspection, the local authority took immediate and well-considered steps to strengthen the support offered to these young people.
32. Senior leaders are actively trying to respond to the lack of housing options through a range of approaches, including internal and external commissioning. The recent introduction of paying for a deposit and six months' rent in advance has enabled some care leavers, who would not previously have been able to, to move into more suitable accommodation.

### **The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: good**

33. The director of children's services, political leaders and the local authority's chief executive have worked assiduously over the past two years, transforming the quality of help, protection and care for their vulnerable children. A clear and ambitious improvement plan and associated sufficiency strategy, underpinned by a 'root and branch' analysis, have addressed effectively the long-standing history of inadequate practice in Torbay. The services that children now receive are consistently effective.
34. Leaders understand well the needs of Torbay's population and the ongoing challenges to maintaining and extending the progress the local authority has made. They have an accurate, balanced and reflective self-assessment of their services. This is reinforced by a comprehensive understanding of the unique, complex demands presented by significant levels of deprivation. Leaders have repeatedly taken the right steps since the previous inspection to reconfigure and realign their services, making them fit for purpose, child-centred and consistent with their improvement priorities. Leaders are not complacent. Instead, a considered and evidence-based approach, informed by reliable performance information and an established quality assurance framework, is sustaining the progress that has been achieved to date. While management direction is recorded clearly, leaders accept that they need to do more to improve the quality, consistency and timeliness of supervision across teams.
35. Greatly improved early help services are underpinned by a coherent strategy. Children have access to an array of well-structured and timely early help. Services are provided by a good range of relevant agencies, demonstrating well-planned and cohesive partnership arrangements. This includes access to

specialist support, for instance the co-location of Department of Work and Pensions staff to help families living in poverty and dedicated work with housing officers.

36. Experienced and newly qualified social workers and other frontline staff value the considerable investment in their professional development. A restorative practice model focuses on working with families. An ethos of 'doing with' rather than 'doing to' is progressively becoming embedded across services, leading to more sophisticated and effective direct work with children and their families. Vacancy rates for qualified social workers have decreased significantly. There are currently only three vacant social work posts. Staff provided by agencies are employed to provide additional support for workers in their assessed and supported year in employment and internationally recruited social workers. Extensive resettlement support, comprehensive induction and capped caseloads support overseas staff until they are more experienced.
37. The 'Learning Academy' developed by the local authority has made a major contribution to the highly successful recruitment and retention strategy, as well as to the increased skills base of the workforce. This offers a three-year programme for newly qualified social workers, as well as advanced and skills-based courses for the wider workforce. Staff consistently describe feeling well supported in their work by highly visible, approachable and involved managers at every level, who listen to their views and take the time to cultivate talent. Supporting and nurturing long-serving staff is prioritised, resulting in promotion to more senior posts. This investment makes social workers want to stay and work in Torbay and ensures that workers have the right skills to improve children's lives. Morale is good across the service.
38. Leaders have responded quickly to changing demands for services despite the unprecedented challenges during the pandemic. There are many examples where decisive action has been taken. For instance, when inspectors found shortcomings in the quality of temporary accommodation for a small number of care leavers, the local authority was already aware of these issues and had plans in place to address them. The bi-weekly, multidisciplinary youth homeless prevention panel works with relevant agencies to prevent homelessness and ensures that care leavers are supported effectively.
39. The local authority is a highly ambitious corporate parent. The corporate parenting board is well attended by a variety of relevant partners and elected members, and shows a determined vision for wanting the best outcomes for Torbay's cared for and care experienced young people. The board is working hard to create more employment opportunities for care leavers through the local authority and its partners. Members of the board have regular contact with the children's group for children in care, 'The Voice', to ensure that children's views are expressed within the board.
40. Significant progress has been made in addressing child exploitation in Torbay. Multi-agency strategic arrangements to track and assess risks are embedded. Tenacious work across the partnership ensures that most exploited and missing children are at the centre of all work and interventions. Staff are rightly proud

of the strategic and operational improvements that have been achieved. Work has progressed from information-sharing to effective collaboration and joint working. This is making a tangible difference to how well children are protected from harm and how successfully their wider welfare is promoted.

41. Performance clinics are held regularly with practitioners and managers to develop a shared understanding of the quality and impact of services, including trends and key strengths and areas for improvement. This knowledge is then used well to target improvement activity, including enhanced management oversight, relevant thematic audits, further monitoring and additional resources.

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