

# LGA Peer Challenge – Early Help

Torbay Council

14 – 17 March 2023

Feedback report





## Contents

1. Executive summary .....	3
2. Key recommendations .....	6
3. Summary of the peer challenge approach .....	8
4. Feedback .....	11
5. Next steps.....	20

## 1. Executive summary


Torbay's Early Help System has been on a journey of transformation and improvement. Peers heard how this journey, which began in 2020, has involved co-production and co-design with stakeholders to re-model the Early Help System, moving away from a service delivery approach towards a stronger collaborative approach that has a focus on early identification, prevention and improved outcomes.

The peer team heard from a range of internal and external stakeholders who told us that the council's political and managerial leadership have worked well together, and with partners, to drive this change. It is the view of the peer team that the council's leadership of the Early Help System is strong, cohesive, visible and respected.

The progress made in the development of Torbay's Early Help System was highlighted as part of the Ofsted inspection of Torbay Council's Children's Services which took place between 21 March and 1 April 2022. Inspectors rated children's services as 'good' and said that services for children in Torbay have significantly improved. Inspectors found that *'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'*.

The council's position statement, shared with the peer team in advance of this peer challenge, shows how the Early Help System was supporting 1022 children in December 2022. This was an increase from 952 at the same time in 2021. There has also been a reduction in referrals into the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) from 2021 and this is being sustained throughout 2022. The position statement shows how this is seen as a strong indicator of the impact that the Early Help preventative approach is having on children and families in Torbay.

The council and partners should strengthen the approach to measuring and evidencing this impact through the development of a Quality Assurance and Performance Framework for Early Help. There are opportunities to build on Torbay's strong partnership approach to the Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) which has been developed for children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). The [Supporting Families Early Help System Guide](#), including the self-assessment tool, should be used to inform the development of this framework.



The development of the framework should be used to help ensure the voice of children, carers and families is captured consistently across the partnership and used to co-design and commission services. Peers saw many examples of professionals and services working together to ensure that the voice of the child and family is heard, but there are opportunities, through the QAF, to ensure that there is a more consistent methodology to this and how it is used to shape delivery of services across the partnership.

During our time on site, peers were pleased to meet with a wide range of council staff and partners including representatives from the voluntary and community sector. We also observed a number of meetings including the Early Help Panel. We were impressed with the culture of energy, creativity, professional curiosity and problem solving amongst staff and partners. Those who met with the peer team demonstrated a commitment to a whole family approach in Torbay. The peer team found that there is an understanding, across professionals, of the guiding principles of Early Help and associated processes to ensure support to families is delivered in a co-ordinated manner. Service users who spoke to the peer team told us *“I would recommend them to anyone”* and *“I didn’t feel like a burden, they were happy and pleased to help”* and *“my son is achieving at last”*.

The wide range of different organisations and partners who met with the peer team indicate that there is diverse offer of Early Help support available to children and families in Torbay. We were particularly impressed with the key role that the voluntary sector is playing to support children and families across the communities of Torbay.

Peers heard about some challenges associated with waiting times for access to mental health support and therapeutic services for children and young people. This reflects national trends where the demand for children’s mental health support has increased following the pandemic. A presentation shared with Torbay’s Children’s Overview and Scrutiny Sub Board in March 2023 (after the peer team were on site) outlines the challenges faced, the actions being taken to reduce waiting times and the options for young people who do not meet the threshold for formal Child and Adolescent Mental Health Support referrals<sup>1</sup>. This report shows how waiting times

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<sup>1</sup> [Torbay Children's Overview and Scrutiny 23 March 2023](#)

are reducing. It will be important for the council and partners to maintain momentum on this work.

The peer team also heard of some challenges relating to the connectivity of ICT systems and operational processes that facilitate procurement of support for staff working within the Early Help System. This means they can sometimes find it more challenging to access the full range of support that is available to social workers within the statutory part of the service. The peer team heard how this is a technical / ICT issue and were pleased to learn how the council is committed to addressing this.

The council's commitment to Early Help is reflected in the significant investment they have made in the Early Help System (referenced in more detail in section 4.1 of this report). This includes five teams comprising of over 35 full and part time officers who fall within the Early Help and Supporting Families Service. This commitment is also demonstrated by Torbay's willingness to test new ways of working and innovate (outlined in more detail in section 4.1). Peers also heard how Torbay have been selected as one of the 75 areas nationally to benefit from the Family Hubs and Start for Life investment and In February 2023 they were awarded trailblazer status.

Governance for Early Help includes a Multi-agency Executive Transformation Board (established in October 2022) and a new Family Hubs Project Board (draft terms of reference for the latter are being finalised). Peers understand that these will replace the Early Help Partnership Board which, at the time of the peer challenge, had not met for a few months. Peers were told that this was due to an embargo which had been in place relating to public announcements linked to some elements of Family Hubs funding. This is seen to have impacted on the ability to engage all partners during this time. It is the view of the peer team that it is important that the council has an active partnership forum in place to provide governance oversight of Early Help including the development of Family Hubs now that this embargo has been lifted.

Building on the opportunities arising from the Family Hubs and Start for Life investment, the peer team found that there is a clear commitment, from all those who spoke with them, to work together to continue the journey of development and improvement of Torbay's Early Help offer and Family Hub model. The commissioning of both this peer challenge and a peer challenge of Early Years undertaken earlier this year, demonstrates this commitment and the council's openness to external

challenge and continuous improvement.

Next steps should involve the partnership working together to review and update Torbay's Early Help vision and strategy and ensure this is co-designed and therefore jointly owned and delivered by all including statutory partners (police, health, education) and non-statutory partners (parents, carers and the voluntary, community and faith sector). The current strategy expires this year (2023). This will also provide the opportunity to reflect the partnership's vision for the development of Family Hubs in Torbay. Again, there are opportunities for the partnership to use the [Supporting Families Early Help System Guide](#) to inform the development of the revised strategy.

The council should also strengthen the scrutiny lens on Torbay's Early Help System. The thematic reports considered by the Children's Overview and Scrutiny Sub Board over the past year capture Early Help as it relates to key thematic areas e.g., SEND, Exploitation, Child Friendly Torbay, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) etc. Moving forward, there is an opportunity to involve the Children's Overview and Scrutiny Sub Board in the oversight of the Early Help System as a whole. Involving them in the work to review and update Torbay's Early Help vision and strategy is an opportunity for this.


## 2. Key recommendations

There are a number of observations and suggestions within the main section of the report. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the council:

### 2.1 Review, refresh and co-design your Early Help Strategy

The current Early Help Strategy expires in 2023. Co-designing the strategy with partners will help to ensure that there is a shared strategic vision for helping families early that is jointly owned across the partnership. There are opportunities for the partnership to use the [Supporting Families Early Help System Guide](#) to inform the development of the revised strategy.

### 2.2 Develop the Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) and performance framework for Early Help



There are opportunities to build on the good practice relating to the QAF for SEND. The council should strengthen systems which can help to facilitate the collation, provision and analysis of quality performance data. Strengthening the approaches to the collation and recording of data will also support the council in evidencing outcomes against the National Supporting Families Outcome Framework.

### **2.3 Strengthen the Overview and Scrutiny lens on the Early Help System**

There are opportunities to strengthen the overview and scrutiny lens on the Early Help System as a whole system. Involving Overview and Scrutiny in the work to review and update Torbay's Early Help vision and strategy presents an opportunity to do this.

### **2.4 Continue to work together across the partnership to meet the increased demand from children and young people for Mental Health and Therapeutic support services**

A presentation shared with the Children's Overview and Scrutiny in March 2023 (after the peer team were on site) outlines the challenges faced, the actions being taken to reduce waiting times and the options for young people who do not meet the threshold for formal CAMHS referrals. It is important that this work continues.

### **2.5 Ensure connectivity of ICT systems and operational processes that facilitate procurement of support at the right**

There are some challenges relating to the connectivity of ICT systems and operational processes that facilitate procurement of support for officers within the Early Help service.

### **2.6 Consistently apply methodology to hear the voice of children, young people and families**

Peers saw many examples of professionals and services working together to ensure that the voice of the child and family is heard including through the work of the Early Help Panel and Family Group Conferencing. Building on this, partners should use the development of the Early Help Quality Assurance and Performance Framework to develop a more consistent methodology (across the partnership) to how this voice is captured and used to inform strategy, the co-design of services and future

commissioning.

## 3. Summary of the peer challenge approach

### 3.1 The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the focus of the peer challenge and peers were selected on the basis of their relevant expertise. The peers were:

- Karen Bradshaw - former Director of Children's Services, Shropshire Council and Department for Education Improvement Adviser
- Councillor Dine Romero - Cabinet Member, Children, Young People and Communities, Bath and North East Somerset Council
- Alison Tomes, Early Help Strategic Lead, Doncaster Council
- Sarah Baker – Local Government Association Peer - Health
- Reg Hooke - former head of the Metropolitan Police Service Child Abuse Investigation Command and Local Safeguarding Children's Board Chair
- Cindy Lowthian – Local Government Association Peer Challenge Manager
- Joseph Sloyan –National Graduate Development officer, Local Government Association

### 3.2 Scope and focus

The Local Government Association (LGA) is working with the Supporting Families and Early Help teams in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), and councils, to co-design and pilot this Early Help Peer Challenge and test out how effective this can be in improving the Early Help System.

Peer Challenge is a tried and tested approach to supporting councils. The LGA has over ten years' experience of facilitating the delivery of peer challenge and it is based on the following sector led improvement principles:

- Councils are responsible for their own improvement
- Stronger local accountability leads to further improvement
- There is a sense of collective responsibility for the performance of the sector as a



whole, and

- The role of the LGA is to provide tools and support

Independent external evaluation and feedback from the sector has endorsed peer challenge as an approach that promotes learning from a sector-led improvement perspective. We are constantly striving to improve outcomes for children, young people and families and an external and independent view can help to accelerate or consolidate progress.

This Early Help Peer Challenge is being piloted with two councils including Torbay Council. Following evaluation of the pilot involving sector colleagues, a decision will be made as to whether it would be useful to roll out a programme of Early Help Peer Challenge activity more widely.

This Early Help Peer Challenge has explored the effectiveness of local Early Help services in improving outcomes for children and families including what works well and opportunities for improvement. The Early Help System Guide has been used to inform the scope which covered the following areas:

1. **Leadership, governance and partnership ownership of the early help system across the local area.** Is there effective senior strategic leadership and governance for the Early Help System involving both the council and partners? Is there leadership accountability for the Early Help System and partnership infrastructure?
2. **Capacity and resources to deliver effective early help.** Is the organisation able to support delivery of Early Help services that improves resilience and outcomes or helps to prevent problems becoming worse? Does the council, working with partners, have the capacity and resources to deliver and improve services? How is the council, working with partners, working to build capacity in communities harnessing the talent and contribution of parents, carers and young people with lived experience to help one another? How does Early Help and the principles of early intervention and prevention inform commissioning?
3. **The effective identification and assessment of children, young people**

**and families who would benefit from early help.** Is Early Help seen as everyone's responsibility? Do partners work together in place based or hub-based working where they are integrated virtually or physically to ensure the effective identification and assessment of children, young people and families who would benefit from Early Help? How is data used and shared safely across the partnership to identify families and their needs?

4. **How well support for families is co-ordinated through whole family working.** To what extent is 'whole family working' the norm for all people-facing public services through a shared practice framework? Are there well-established mechanisms to gather and act on feedback from families and engage people with lived experience in service design, governance and quality assurance?
5. **The impact of early help in improving outcomes for children and families.** Is there is a culture of using evaluation and evidence to inform development of the Early Help System and improve outcomes for children and families? Do families say they know how to navigate local services and how to get help and that professionals work together to one plan in a team around the family? Do families say that those that helped them listened carefully, cared about them and told them about their strengths? Do families say that the help they have received addressed all their problems and they are better connected to their own support network and local community

### **3.3 The peer challenge process**

Peer challenges are improvement focused; it is important to stress that this was not an inspection. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the Early Help System in Torbay and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent three days onsite in Torbay, during which they:

- Gathered information and views from more than 30 meetings including partners, voluntary sector representatives, staff, members and people with lived experience.
- We listened to more than 100 people


This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. In presenting feedback, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members.

## 4. Feedback

### 4.1 Leadership, governance and partnership ownership of the Early Help System across the local area

The Early Help System in Torbay has been on a journey of development and improvement since September 2020. This has included work, through the Torbay Early Help Partnership Board, to ensure Early Help is seen as a wider partnership concept involving statutory and non-statutory partners. The peer team spoke to a range of internal staff and external partners and found that there is a good understanding of the guiding principles of Early Help, associated thresholds and the expectations of partners.

Torbay have been selected as one of 75 areas to benefit from the Family Hubs and Start for Life investment and in February 2023 they were awarded trailblazer status. The governance arrangements for Early Help have been revised accordingly. A multi-agency Transformation Board was established in October 2022 to provide strategic partnership oversight, challenge and support for the implementation of the Family Hub Strategy, incorporating statutory and non-statutory partners. This includes the voluntary, community and faith sectors as key partners who can help reflect the voice of children, young people and parent/carers. A Family Hubs Project Board, to be chaired by the Director of Children's Services, is being established to oversee the management of the Family Hubs project and this will feed into the Transformation Board. Together these will replace the Early Help Partnership Board which, at the time of the peer challenge, had not met for a few months. As outlined in Section One




of this report, Peers were told that this was due to an embargo which had been in place relating to public announcements linked to some elements of Family Hubs funding. This is seen to have impacted on the ability to engage all partners during this time and had led to frustrations from some partners. It is important that the council has an active partnership forum in place to provide governance oversight of Early Help including the development of Family Hubs now that this embargo has been lifted.

Peers were pleased to learn how the overarching strategic governance arrangements for Early Help align and feed into the wider governance arrangements for Children's Services. This includes the Children's Safeguarding Partnership which is integral to the governance and oversight of services for children, families and carers across Torbay. Peers were also pleased to hear how the work of the Integrated Care Board (ICB) includes a focus on prevention of ill health, the Public Health agenda and voice of children and young people. A ICB Quality sub-group is doing a deep dive into Children and Young People.

The Governance of the Early Help System includes three locality based integrated partnerships based in each of the three main towns of Torbay (Torquay, Paignton and Brixham). These virtual teams meet on a bi-monthly basis to facilitate joint working and sharing of good practice and the minutes for these meetings are published on the council's website. Both the council's position statement and minutes from the meetings show participation from a wide range of partners including the voluntary and community sector.

The peer team learned that the creation of Family Hubs will be aligned to each of these three integrated partnerships. Torbay's three existing Children's centres – one in each of the three main towns in Torbay – will become Family Hubs who will work across their respective areas adopting a 'hub and spoke' model. The Family Hub model will build on the existing Early Help System including Torbay's 0–19 health services which bring together Children's Centres, Public Health Nursing and other specialist services. The council's position statement outlines in more detail the wide range of services already provided through these centres and proposals to expand these to deliver Family Hubs in Torbay. Proposals will also involve the creation of a virtual hub offer including a SEND advice line and website.



Peers heard how there are some challenges associated with the physical condition of some of the proposed buildings to be used for the Family Hubs. It is the view of the peer team that partners will need to work together to ensure these are child and young people friendly.

Partners, including representatives from the voluntary and community sector, told the peer team that they welcome the council's commitment to continue to work with them to co-produce and co-design the Family Hub model in Torbay. This is important as it will help ensure shared ownership and accountability for delivery.

Governance for Early Help also includes a weekly Early Help Multi-Agency Panel comprising of key partners including the voluntary and community sector. The panel facilitates joint working across the partnership to ensure children and families receive the right level of support at the right time. The peer team were pleased to be invited to observe a panel meeting and were impressed with the professional curiosity and commitment to a whole family approach demonstrated by the Panel's members. Torbay's Ofsted report highlights how *"the weekly multidisciplinary early help panel ensures that most children get the right level of help at the right time."*

The peer team also met with the members of the council's senior leadership team, senior managers, portfolio holder and children's scrutiny chair. There is a cohesive approach to the leadership of the Early Help System with senior leaders working together to champion children and families. Senior leaders told the peer team that the council is still on a journey (of improvement) and that *'we are going in the right direction'*.

The council's commitment to Early Help is reflected in the significant investment they have made in the Early Help System. There are five teams comprising of over 35 full and part time officers who fall within the Early Help and Supporting Families Service (this also includes some co-located staff from housing and the Department of Work and Pensions).

This commitment is also reflected in the willingness of senior leaders and partners to innovate and test new ways of working. This includes the decision, in September 2022, to move the Family Group Conference Service to sit under the umbrella of Early Help Services (and not in statutory services). This is helping to ensure that families are offered FGC as early as possible. It also includes the decision to appoint

a Child in Need Independent Reviewing Officer to be directly managed under the Early Help and Supporting Families Programme. Peers heard how the IRO, appointed in January 2023, is already helping to ensure the focus for children subject to Child in Needs Plans remains step-down to Early Help at the early possible point.


Peers were also impressed with work being undertaken with the University of Exeter which has a focus on the preventative role of the Early Help System. This work is being used to inform new ways of working with a particular focus on the role of the Voluntary sector.

Torbay's Early Help Strategy (2021 – 2023) outlines a partnership commitment to ensure Torbay's children and families are heard when they first ask for help, to minimise the risk of problems getting worse and help them address them at the earliest opportunity. Whilst a copy of Supporting Families Early Help System Guide and associated self-assessment was shared with the Peer Team, it was not clear how this has influenced the current strategy or how the local self-assessment was driving forward the Early Help vision and continuous improvement. The current strategy expires this year (2023). The council should now work with partners to review and update this Strategy, using the Early Help System Guide. This will provide the opportunity to capture and reflect the partnership vision for the development of Family Hubs in Torbay.

The peer team looked at the agenda and papers for the Children's Overview and Scrutiny Sub Board over the past year. They were pleased to see that the committee has considered reports which cover key thematic areas which form part of the Early Help System in Torbay. These include SEND, Exploitation, Child Friendly Torbay and, more recently, CAMHS. All of these thematic areas are critical to the Early Help offer. It is the view of the peer team that there are opportunities to strengthen the overview and scrutiny lens on the Early Help System as a single, whole system. Involving overview and scrutiny in the work to review and update Torbay's Early Help vision and strategy presents an opportunity to do this.

## **4.2 Capacity and resources to deliver effective early help**

Those who met with the peer team including internal and external staff and partners



are passionate, committed and enthusiastic about whole family working. Lots of work is taking place to harness shared partnership resources and build capacity to support children and families at an early stage. As outlined earlier in this report, the Peer Team were particularly impressed with the voluntary and community sector who form an integral and well-developed part of the Early Help offer.

Projects include the Torbay Promise which is supporting vulnerable families who are expecting a child to ensure the first 1001 days in a child's life are characterised by 'best start principles'. They also include Operation Encompass for 0–5-year-olds which is helping to identify and support pre-school aged children exposed to domestic violence. Linked to this, peers were pleased to learn how the Integrated Care Board recognise a need to work more closely with the Accident and Emergency Service and Primary care to embed work around Domestic Abuse and sexual violence in primary care. These are also areas of focus of the Childrens Safeguarding Partnership Board.

The peer team heard of some challenges associated with access to Early Help therapeutic support and mental health services. This reflects national trends where the demand for children's mental health support has increased following the pandemic.

A presentation shared with the Children's Overview and Scrutiny in March 2023 (after the peer team were on site) outlines the challenges faced in relation to mental health support services, the actions being taken to reduce waiting times and the options for young people who do not meet the threshold for formal CAMHS referrals. This presentation shows that the percentage of children with a probable mental health need in Torbay is increasing year on year and was significantly impacted by COVID, and that referrals into CAMHS have increased. It shows that there have been improvements in waiting times since July 2022 with 80% of children and young people seen within the 18-week target and that a recovery target of 92% is predicted by August 2023. It will be important for the council and partners to maintain momentum on this work.

The peer team also heard about some challenges relating to the connectivity of ICT systems and operational processes that facilitate procurement of support at the right time for families. This means that staff working within the Early Help Service can



sometimes find it more difficult to commission elements of support that are available to statutory social care staff. The council should look to address this.

Peers were told that throughout 2021 and 2022, the council's internal Early Help Service was re-organised to ensure sufficient capacity, skills and resources to support the Early Help Partnership. This has included the re-location of Family Group Conference to the Early Help Service (from the statutory part of the service). It has also involved ensuring Safeguarding, Early Help and Business Intelligence falls under the remit of a single head of service to ensure synergy between the preventative work and statutory areas of the service.

The council's position statement provides a more detailed overview of the service structure including two Family Intervention Teams (FITs) focussed on Domestic Abuse and Child Exploitation. The council's on-going commitment to Early Help is demonstrated by a recent decision to invest additional resources to appoint two Family Intervention Team Practitioners for the FITs. The service structure also incorporates a SEND Graduated Response Team, Homeless/Poverty Prevention Team and Community Engagement and Partnership Support Team.

The demands placed on the council's Early Help service are increasing. Family Group Conference (FGC), managed under the Early Help umbrella, is allowing families to be offered FGCs at the point of referral into Children's Social Care in order to support family led planning from the outset. This is having a significant impact on referrals to FGC with the number of children being referred increasing; 46% of all referrals (by family) for the quarter to the end of December 2022 came from Early Help compared to just 10% coming from Early Help the previous quarter.

Torbay were supporting 1022 children across the Early Help partnership in December 2022, compared with 952 at the same time in December 2021. Furthermore, 47% of children are supported by a lead professional within the internal Early Help Service which is higher than the figure of 23% the previous year.

The position statement shows a reduction of contacts into Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) from 2021, and how this was sustained throughout 2022. Only 2% of referrals to Children's Social Care in the period May 2022 to December 2022 were recorded as coming from Early Help. The percentage of contacts progressing to Targeted/Early Help is continuing to increase, from 11% in 2019/20 to 25% as of



December 2022. These figures are a strong indication that the Early Help preventative work is becoming more embedded.

Peers heard how this also presents challenges associated with managing the increased demand for Early Help services and the increasing complexity of work being accepted into Early Help. It is the view of the peer team that developing a consistent methodology to demonstrate quality and impact of interventions (through the development of an Early Help Quality Assurance and Performance Framework as outlined in Section 4.4) is a key next step as this can be used to support the business case for future investment and also help to maximise internal and external funding for Early Help

The peer team were particularly impressed with the work of the council's Learning Academy. The aim is to make Torbay a destination of choice for experienced and newly qualified social care staff through embedding restorative practice, building employee engagement and retention, streamlining Quality Assurance activity and enhancing practice standards. The Academy is also responsible for the workforce development plan for the Family Hubs and has been supporting project delivery.

#### **4.3 The effective identification and assessment of children, young people and families who would benefit from early help**

The peer team spoke to a range of internal staff and external partners who demonstrated a good understanding of the guiding principles of Early Help and associated thresholds. Detailed guidance has been co-designed and shared across the partnership including a practitioner's handbook. A copy of this handbook was shared with the peer team and peers were pleased to see how it covers all key features of Torbay's Early Help model including governance, locality networks, Family Hubs, restorative practice and the Early Help Workforce Development Strategy. Training has been delivered to 153 practitioners across the partnership.

The data outlined in section 4.2 of this report show how partners are identifying a need for Family Group Conferencing at an earlier stage and how the number of Early Help referrals are increasing from 952 in December 2021 to 1022 children in December 2022. This data also shows a reduction of contacts into MASH from 2021,

and how this is being sustained throughout 2022. This is seen as an indication of the impact that Early Help is having for children and families.

The peer team spoke with service users who spoke highly of their experience of Early Help in Torbay. Peers heard *“I would recommend them to anyone”* and *“my son is achieving at last”* and *“I didn’t feel like a burden, they were happy to help”* and that a staff member was *“an amazing human being”*.


An ongoing challenge is to ensure partners refer children and families to Early Help at the earliest point. The peer team heard that there are some examples where it was felt some schools could have referred children into Early Help at an earlier stage. On-going communication, engagement and training across the partnership will be important in order to address this challenge.

#### **4.4 How well support for families is co-ordinated through whole family working**

The peer team spoke with staff and partners across the partnership who are clearly committed to working together through whole family working. As outlined in section 4.2 of this report, this includes Family Group Conferencing which is now managed under the Early Help umbrella. This is allowing families to be offered FGCs at the point of referral into Children’s Social Care in order to support family led planning from the outset.

If a family’s needs are escalating and it is clear to partners that a multi-agency response is needed (with no obvious Lead Professional) processes are in place to allowing a referral into the weekly Early Help Panel. As outlined earlier in this report, peers were pleased to observe a meeting of the multi-agency panel and saw how a wide range of partners are working together to help ensure children get the right level of help at the right time. From the conversations we had with a range of officers and partners, and the meetings we observed, there is a clear commitment to restorative practice and to working with and alongside children and families rather than ‘doing to’ them.

The council’s Family Intervention Teams (FITS) support whole family working, and each have particular specialisms. They are utilising a range of tools that place children and young people at the centre. These include evidence-based parenting



programmes, Reducing Parental Conflict and Community Reinforcement and Family Training (CRAFT) tools and interventions to mitigate and reduce the risks associated with exploitation. They are also working with families and young people to prevent and relieve homelessness.


Torbay's Children's Services Quality Assurance framework, for children's social care and Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) includes elements of Early Help support and interventions (as Early Help relates to children's social care and SEND). The peer team were particularly impressed with the QAF for SEND and the work undertaken, following a written statement of action, to strengthen this. This QAF includes a three-monthly cycle of audits and thematic DIP samples. It also includes the establishment of a Multiagency SEND QA panel including a representative from SEND Family Voice Torbay.

The council should build on this practice and develop a QAF for Early Help. This will help them to assess and demonstrate how Early Help Assessment and Family Plans reflect whole family working and the impact of whole family working across the partnership. It will also help to test and demonstrate how the voice of children and families is heard and used to inform Early Help.

#### **4.5 The impact of early help in improving outcomes for children and families.**

Families who we spoke with during this peer challenge told us that the Early Help support they had received was making a difference to their lives. We also heard from practitioners who told us that, as the changes and improvements to the Early Help System have become more embedded, morale and commitment has been enhanced as they feel that they are making a difference to the lives of children and families. Peers heard how *"we are a much happier service; people like to work here"* and *"I really like my job"* and that *"early help has helped reduce social workers case allocation numbers."* There is an energy of creativity and problem solving amongst all those we met.

As outlined throughout this report (see section 4.2) the data available does indicate that Early Help appears to be contributing to managing demand on children's social



care. The peer team recognise that whilst the impact and outcomes of Early Help are long term aspirations, the council and partners should now strengthen mechanisms for evidencing progress and impact. This will also help to provide evidence to support future investment decisions.

This should include the development of the QAF for Early Help as outlined in section 4.4 of this report. It should also include developing systems that facilitate the collation and provision of quality performance data for staff and partners. Peers understand that this work is in progress and include a commitment to use existing data-sharing agreements to share data across the partnership that will feed into a Family Hubs dashboard. Strengthening the approaches to the collation and recording of data should support the council in collating robust data, evidence and outcomes against the National Supporting Families Outcome Framework.

The council and partners should also explore the different evidenced based measurement tools available that can support them in measuring progress for children, young people, families and carers who are supported through the Early Help System e.g., tools such as Webstar.

In undertaking work to strengthen the Quality Assessment and Performance Framework for Early Help, there are opportunities to use the Supporting Families Early Help System Guide framework. This framework, including the self-assessment tool, could be used to facilitate partnership conversations in relation to the key areas that have been shown to influence the effectiveness and impact of early help

## 5. Next steps

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership, with partners, will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings.

In the meantime, Paul Clarke, Principal Adviser for the South West, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Paul Clarke is available to discuss any further support the council requires

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