



Department
for Education



Nancy Meehan, Director of Children's Services (DCS), Torbay Council,
Anne-Marie Bond, Chief Executive, Torbay Council,
Mark Hackett, Interim Chief Executive Officer, NHS Devon (ICB)

08 July 2026

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

Dear Nancy, Anne-Marie and Mark,

We would like to begin by thanking all colleagues across Torbay Council, NHS Devon ICB, Children and Family Health Devon (CFHD), schools, and parent representatives for their active participation in the deep-dive sessions held over March 2026. We are grateful for the openness, the commitment and the evidence of significant work progressing across the partnership.

The purpose of this review was to understand progress against the Priority Impact Plan (PIP), test Torbay's readiness for the forthcoming monitoring inspection, and evaluate the effectiveness of partnership activity across the five priority areas: governance, commissioning, multi-agency working, reducing waiting times, and preparing for adulthood.

We reviewed materials you shared, including the updated Joint Strategic Needs analysis, PIP documentation, governance papers, data dashboards, and local evaluations, as well as the discussions across each deep-dive meeting and the feedback presentation summarising findings from all five sessions.

Summary Findings

Across all priority areas, there is clear evidence that Torbay has taken positive steps to address the areas of weakness identified at inspection. We observed strong signs of a maturing partnership, with improved collaboration, strengthened governance and greater alignment across education, health and care. This was evidenced through examples shared during the review, including the early impact of the exclusion pilot (which remains an area for improvement) and the work to strengthen the Local Education Board, both of which are contributing to more distributed leadership and shared ownership across the partnership.

While the emphasis has been on ensuring the timely implementation of the Priority Impact Plan, the intention is now to also focus on evidencing the difference the

improvements are making to children and young people with SEND and their families.

The partnership has correctly identified the 3 challenges that require particular attention during 2026 as the time taken to issue new EHCPs, exclusion from secondary schools and waiting times for health services.

A recent focus of the SEND Local Improvement Partnership Board has been on improving communication at all levels and embed co-productions with the aim of improving relations with parents as recommended in the inspection report.

The following sections set out our detailed findings across the five Priority Areas.

Priority Area 1 — Governance, Leadership & Collaboration

There is clear evidence that governance arrangements in Torbay have been strengthened since the SEND inspection. Partners described a more mature and constructive partnership culture, supported by the introduction of an independent chair whose leadership has helped increase pace, sharpen accountability, and build confidence across services. Implementation of the actions in the Priority Impact Plan are broadly on track with examples of partners taking prompt action to address issues.

The multi-agency quality assurance and data arrangements have also developed significantly, with the QA and Data Subgroup now working more cohesively to review audit findings, resolve quality issues and track progress across services in a more systematic manner.

The partnership has also taken steps to rebuild trust and improve relationships with parents and carers. There are more opportunities for young people and parents to express their views and influence the development of services. The partnership recognises further work is required in to embed co-production and improve communications so that its SEND pledge to families becomes a reality

We heard a small number of examples where gaps or delays in communication with parent carers reduced the impact of otherwise positive work taking place across the partnership. For instance, some parent carers reported that they only became aware of the neurodiversity hotline after the navigator pilot had closed. This illustrates how important, timely and proactive communication is in supporting understanding and confidence in service developments. Given the historical context of distrust and frustration for some families, continued emphasis on clearly explaining what is changing, why, and how parent carers are being engaged throughout implementation will help ensure that positive developments are fully realised.

We are pleased that you have recruited a SEND programme manager who can support with this as well as progressing key aspects of the Priority Improvement Plan and reporting on its impact.

Priority Area 2 — Commissioning

There has been positive progress across your commissioning workstreams. The recent co-produced Joint Strategic Needs Analysis (JSNA) provides an up-to-date understanding of needs across the partnership. JSNA themes are informing further education commissioning, adult social care planning, early years work and specialist outreach programmes. The creation of a commissioners' group should focus on ensuring that Torbay can evidence how the JSNA is being used to accurately identify and effectively manage risks when service gaps are identified across the partnership.

Substantial progress has also been made in sufficiency work, including new autism provision at Combe Pafford, School, a widening of post 16 opportunities and support, enhanced resource bases in mainstream schools, strengthened commissioning of Education Other Than At School (EOTAS) provision and a clearer approach to transitions for children with moderate learning difficulty.

There are signs that providing support around localities of schools are producing benefits. The evaluation of the locality pilots along with the use of the Improvement Support Funding recently provided by the DfE should be helpful in informing the development of the partnership's Experts and Hands offer.

Inspectors reported that a small number of children with SEND had been placed in unregistered children's homes, with some remaining in these placements for extended periods, in the "what the partnership needs to do better" section of your SEND inspection report. As part of the area partnership's preparation for the SEND monitoring inspection, it will be important to evidence how it has responded to this observation. Given the limited time spent on this issue during the stocktake, we were not able to explore it in sufficient detail to draw significant conclusions regarding current practice or impact. We would welcome the opportunity to consider this area in more detail as part of the next full stocktake review.

The learning disability pathway has been reviewed and information for families updated but were unable to see how this work had benefited children and young people. For example, whether there had been improvements in identification and support or more young people registered for and receiving their health checks from the age of 14 years onwards.

Priority Area 3 — Multi-Agency Working (Identification, Assessment & Meeting Need)

The deep-dive discussions evidenced that multi-agency working has improved markedly across Torbay.

Partners reported a noticeable uplift in the quality of EHCPs, supported by clearer processes, the Designated Social Care Officer and the application of the EHCP standard operational procedures in the health services. School representatives we spoke too reported an improvement in the quality of plans. Torbay's well embedded quality auditing process is reporting an improvement in the overall quality of EHCPs.

Improving the timeliness of EHCPs is proving to be a considerable challenge mainly due to the difficulties in recruiting and retaining educational psychologists alongside the increase in requests for EHCPs adding to the workload of on staff working in the statutory assessment service. The service managers have been diligent in reviewing systems and processes for improving efficiency and additional capacity has been provided to reduce the number of children who have been waiting over 20 weeks for their EHCP as well as increasing the proportion of new EHCPs issued within 20 weeks. However, the rise in requests for EHC needs assessment remains a significant challenge to the partnership.

The appointment of a head of service for quality first teaching is welcomed. Her work in evaluating the graduated response to identify its strengths and barriers to its adoption in schools will be helpful in informing plans for ensuring its implementation throughout Torbay. There is evidence of increased engagement of schools such as involvement in the Whole School SENDQA. The training offer and support to schools has improved since the inspection and has received favourable feedback.

The introduction of the balanced model for providing speech and language services complements the development of the graduated response in schools.

The introduction of the Team Around the Special School (TAS) approach has improved identification of emerging needs and provided rapid multi-agency problem-solving.

A number of initiatives have been introduced to support pupils at risk of exclusion and provide support and training for schools identifying those with the highest exclusion rates. There has been a reduction in overall exclusions however work to date has not reduced the exclusion of pupils with SEND.

Priority Area 4 — Reducing Waiting Times & Strengthening Support While Waiting

The partnership has made meaningful progress in reducing waiting times in several areas, particularly mental health. CAMHS (MERS) waiting times have reduced to 18 weeks, supported by a new triage model that will offer contact within four weeks of referral. Early-help and pre-diagnostic support has also improved through the ND advice line, parent support programmes, expanded school-based outreach, and integrated Family Hubs and Health provision. Multi-agency risk management has strengthened, with high-risk children consistently prioritised through triage and escalation panels. The palliative care pathway is well-established and well-regarded, and there were pointed discussions around conferring with local other areas to ensure there is a clear narrative around sleep support pathways.

Waiting times for Autism assessment and speech and language therapy (SALT) waiting times — particularly for over-5s — remain a concern and will require continued prioritisation. There was also some feedback from parent carers & families that they continue to be uncertain about where to access information or how to

navigate the system, emphasising the need for clearer, more cohesive communication.

The work to clarify map the neurodiversity offer across Torbay should be helpful to practitioners and families.

Priority Area 5 — Preparing for Adulthood

There is encouraging evidence of improved pathways and commissioning arrangements that support young people moving into adulthood. Targeted investment over the past three years has strengthened supported internships, SEND employment pathways, the post 16 education opportunities, adult social care and mental health services to meet the needs of young people when they reach 18 years. The multi-agency SEND employment forum is increasingly effective in bringing system partners together to shape pathways, share intelligence and address gaps.

The partnership has taken steps to improve the pathways from children to adult services. This includes identification of children and young people who may require support, starting transitions planning earlier and improved liaison between services. However, we are unsure of the extent to which the partnership's arrangements meet the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) quality standards on transition from children's social care and health services to adult services and comply with the Department for Education's guidance on the use of Risk of NEET Indicators (RONI) to support young people's participation in education, employment and training. the).

The six multi-agency audits of the PfA experiences of six young people undertaken in November 2025 has been helpful in identifying what has been working well and what improvements are needed. The partnership should be in a position by the end of the year to demonstrate the impact this audit has had in improving support of young people as they transition to adulthood.

Next Steps & Recommendations

In summary the partnership has made good progress in implementing its Priority Impact Plan across all 5 priorities with some early evidence of it having a positive impact.

For the next stocktake we think it would be helpful to focus on:

- a) the impact of the improvements achieved on the experiences of children and young people and their families across all 5 of the priority impact area.
- b) The extent to which it is possible to demonstrate communication and relationships with families is improving.

How the partnership has responded to the 3 risk areas it has identified.

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,

Mohamed Jimale