**Out of County Placements Protocol**

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**What children have told us**

*“It was always nice knowing that if something went wrong, I knew I could turn somewhere if I needed to and when I needed to.”*

*“[NAME] is amazing he has done so much to help me and has helped me become the achieving adult I am today.”*

[Anonymous quotations taken from care experienced young people’s responses to the Bright Spots survey, May 2021]

**It is clear that CONNECTIONS are not only valued by cared for and care experienced young people, they mitigate against the risk of loneliness and low wellbeing. As such, it is of significant importance in placement planning to consider the locality of these connections, and how a placement can support a child or young person to maintain them. **

**Scope of the Protocol**

The scope of this protocol is to outline the process in respect of decision-making, and expectations in relation to planning, in instances whereby Torbay cared for children are placed out of county, or at some distance from Torbay. It has been highlighted and recognised that these children are amongst the most vulnerable and may be at additional risk to those who are living closer to home.

Within Torbay, one of the key priorities for the Corporate Parenting Strategy is to ensure that children who we place out of the county are not disadvantaged but have the same chances as all of our children and young people. This report seeks to identify who the cohort of children are who are placed out of county, some of the key issues for their care and well-being and how services are provided for them in comparison to those who live closer to home, in addition to expectations of social workers and Team Managers in respect of their work with these cared for children and young people and amendments to policy and procedure which have been made and will continue to be to ensure that these children and young people are safeguarded and prioritised.

**Why is this important?**

Do you remember a time when you have moved to a new area or started a new job in a new organisation? Remember that feeling of being completely out of your comfort zone, alienated from everything familiar to you and the sense of anxiety that caused for you?

Imagine that you have just become a cared for child. You are adjusting to being outside of your mother, father or other family member’s care, perhaps for the first time. You have just met your new carers for the first time. You are managing a lot of complex emotions, feelings of sadness, loss, grief, bereavement, anger, possibly shame and guilt.

Now imagine that you are doing all of this in a new town or village or city, some distance from the place you call home. Everything familiar to you, the streets, the shops, the parks, the open spaces, the beach...all of that has been replaced by strange and unfamiliar sights.

Now imagine that, because you have moved to this place, you can no longer go to your old school. All of your peer and friendship groups are gone in an instant and you have to start the daunting process of making new connections, in a new school, in a new place. Despite the fact you might have been resistant to school before, all of your old teachers who had got to know you and understand you are replaced with new ones who know about you, your life or your circumstances. Not only are you the new kid, you are the new kid who doesn’t live with their family, who doesn’t know the area, who doesn’t have any friends yet and who doesn’t understand the rhythms and music of this new place.

Cared for children and young people are especially vulnerable and important, not only because of the emotional impact that this can have as outlined above but also because:

\*There is an increased risk of isolation and feelings of disconnection for the child with their life story and connections and relationships. Children are no longer part of their network and home environment. They will be separated from their parents, siblings, friends, school, extended family and the place they have grown up and this may impact adversely on their sense of belonging and identity.

\*There is a reliance on local services outside of Torbay, which are less well understood.

\*There is likely to be less capacity for immediate and support from professionals involved in the child’s care, for example their social worker, due to the complications associated with the distance.

\*It is not as easy to monitor the quality of placements when they are at some distance from Torbay.

\*Children and young people will not have access to specific specialist services such as local CAMHS provision when they are not living locally. There may be significant disruption to education or other provision.

\*Children with Special Educational Needs can get “stuck” out of county as they are unable to move back due to lack of appropriate school placement.

\*If there are safeguarding concerns, it may not be as easy to get full information about the concerns and to visit quickly to ensure a child is safe.

\*Children placed in mother and baby placements are more vulnerable, particularly if the parent then wants to remain in the same area after the placement ends. This means that social workers are monitoring children who are on Supervision Orders who are living at some distance for example.

\*For health outcomes, there is currently a lack of a clearly defined commissioning and delivery model for children placed out of county, with lack of clarity therefore on clinical governance.

Historically, there has been a misperception that, in situations whereby a child or young person becomes cared for due to risks relating to exploitation, an out of county placement would result in immediate or longer term reduction of risk. However, the impact of out of county placements as outlined above remains absolutely relevant to this cohort of young people, if not more so. As the diagram below outlines, by removing a cared for young person at risk of exploitation in their local area to a placement out of county, their vulnerability may in fact escalate as the feelings of disconnection, isolation and a lack of belonging become more pronounced, and by virtue of this, vulnerability to exploitation increases. In intentionally placing this young person out of county, what we actually do is removes the safety buffers of their positive connections, such as family, peer and professionals relationships.



**Children placed out of county**

In July 2021, 33% of cared for children and young people were placed more than twenty miles from the address they lived in at the point of becoming cared for. It must be noted that, for some of these young people, they are placed in certain locations in line with their wishes and feelings, and close to family networks in other areas. Similarly, due to the size and location of Torbay, a number of these cared for children are placed in neighbouring Local Authorities such as Devon and Cornwall, just outside of the twenty mile cut-off. Only 11% of our cared for children live outside of Torbay and neighbouring Local Authorities as of the 16th July 2021.

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| 16th July 2021 | Total cared for = 306 |
| 102 children placed out of county excluding those placed for adoption  | 33% |
| 68 placed in neighbouring LAs | 22% |
| 34 outside of Torbay and neighbouring LAs | 11% |



**Matching**

The decision to place a child in an out of county placement must be centred on the specific needs of the child, and the capacity of the identified placement to meet these needs. Key questions to ask, which are reflected in the matching flowchart to the left, are:

What are the child or young person’s specific needs? What are the foster carer or placement provider’s specific skills and knowledge and how would this impact on their capacity to meet these needs?

Are there other children, whether birth children or cared for children, in placement? How does impact on the potential match?

What gaps in terms of capacity are there and could these be mitigated by additional support wrapped around the placement?

Have matching discussions involved the appropriate people i.e. the child’s social worker, the foster carer or placement provider, education staff or the Virtual School, other professionals who know and understand the child and their needs?

Has location been considered? Where is the potential placement? Would this placement enable a child or young person to remain within their established local network?

What are the short, medium and long term outcomes intended for this child or young person within this placement? Is this intended to be a longer term permanent placement or a short term, bridging placement? What is the exit plan?

***Once this analysis of the available placements have been completed, the Initial Matching Checklist and Record of Discussion (on the right) should be completed and recorded on the child’s file. This includes any immediate need in respect of placement support, for example enhanced placement fees, associated therapy through the fostering agency and any other support that may be required to meet the needs of the child. If funding is required, appropriate HOS agreement or ratification through Access to Resources should be sought AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. No placement should be accepted on the basis of a promise of additional support, if appropriate authorisation has not been sought and confirmed.***

**Decision-making**

All decisions to place a child out of county need to be ratified by the relevant Head of Service for the child, to confirm that the decision to request a placement outside of Torbay is in line with the child or young person’s care plan and there are no alternative plans that could be implemented. Head of Service endorsement is required to initiate a search for an out of county placement and to accept an out of county placement.

**Specific questions related to children at risk of exploitation**

Has the Local Authority in which the child will be placed been notified appropriately?

Has the Local Authority in which the child will be placed been sent the exploitation toolkit and any other relevant information about the child, for example information relating to missing episodes and risk management strategies or plans?

Have the local exploitation profile and missing/exploitation protocols been received from the provider and has this been considered as part of the placement planning process? Do you as a social worker or Team Manager have access to these protocols? Are these referred to within the placement planning meeting or Cared For Reviews?

What arrangements are there for independent return home interviews and advocacy through the offer from the provider? If there are no arrangements, how is Torbay going to ensure that these take place and are of a high quality?

Have you made a referral to the local MACE or equivalent missing or CSE forum in the Local Authority in which the child will be placed? Have you provided key contact details for allocated workers, to ensure efficient and timely information-sharing with safeguarding partners in the local area? Have you ensured that you are invited to all key meetings?

Are Torbay’s missing and exploitation protocols reflected within the child’s plan? For example, Torbay will still trigger 72 hour and repeat missing strategy meetings on behalf of our cared for young people and this needs to be reflected within the young person’s care plan. Safeguarding partners will also need to be aware that they will be invited to these meetings, as experts in terms of local knowledge and the local exploitation profile.

**How do we monitor the health, safety and wellbeing of our children placed at a distance?**

***At a social worker level, we agree to:***

\*Ensure that a placement planning meeting takes place within five working days. This should include a robust handover, involving the Cared For Child Health team, in respect of a child’s health needs, ensuring a clear outline of roles and responsibilities in implementing the care plan for both the receiving and placing services.

\*Adhere to the considerations and recommendations within this protocol.

\*Maintain frequent contact with children placed at a distance, not only in line with statutory visiting requirements. This could include weekly telephone, text messaging or virtual visiting, dependent on the preference of the child or young person.

\*Undertake specific risk assessments in respect of the risk to the child of being placed at a distance and any subsequent actions or considerations which arise as a result of this risk.

\*Act quickly to identify additional support services required for children placed at a distance, include therapeutic and wellbeing support.

\*Ensure that the SDQ process is followed and that CAMHS consultation is sought as a result if concerns are identified about a child or young person’s mental health or wellbeing.

\*Work with health to ensure the Initial and Review Health Assessment process is adhered to and used as a means of informing a child or young person’s care plan.

***At a Team Manager level, we agree to:***

\*Know the children within the team who are at placed at a distance and prioritise these children and young people in terms of oversight and understanding.

\*Have arrangements in place to ensure that there are other members of the team with an understanding of the child, who can act and support the child in situations whereby their allocated social worker is off work.

\*Ensure that children placed at a distance are the focus of regular supervision.

\*Support social workers in ensuring that the features of this protocol are reflected within the child or young person’s care plan.

\*Attend fortnightly meetings with senior management in respect of planning and oversight in relation to those children placed at a distance.

***At a Senior Manager level, we agree to:***

\*Keep a Tracker of those children placed at a distance, which is reviewed monthly. This will also include information relating to the most recent exploitation toolkit, thereby identifying those children at risk of exploitation and the additional actions required as outlined within this protocol.

\*Undertake regular dip sampling of those children placed at a distance, to ensure that this protocol and practice standard are being adhered to and to identify any patterns or trends which point to service improvement opportunities.

\*Meet fortnightly with Team Managers in respect of planning and oversight in relation to those children placed at a distance.

\*Develop and maintain a Directory of Services, both at a local and national level.

\*Maintain oversight of the placement quality for children placed at a distance at Director Level through the implementation of the Independent Placement Oversight Panel.

\*Use the role of the Placement Auditor to ensure that children placed at a distance are cared for in high quality provisions, which meet their needs.

Signed: 

Review date: January 2022