

# Area SEND inspection of Durham Local Area Partnership

Inspection dates: 24 to 28 June 2024

Dates of previous inspections: 22 to 24 January 2020

## Inspection outcome

The local area partnership's arrangements lead to inconsistent experiences and outcomes for children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). The local area partnership must work jointly to make improvements.

The next full area SEND inspection will be within approximately 3 years.

Ofsted and CQC ask that the local area partnership updates and publishes its strategic plan based on the recommendations set out in this report.

## Information about the local area partnership

Since the previous inspection in January 2020, there have been changes to the governance structure across the local area partnership (LAP). These include new governance appointments and the implementation of the Integrated Strategic Commissioning Team in 2020.

The commissioning of health services changed across England in 2022. At this time, the responsibility for health services in Durham passed to the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (ICB). Durham County Council and the North East and North Cumbria ICB are jointly responsible for the planning and commissioning of services for children and young people with SEND in Durham.

Durham County Council commissions alternative provision (AP) for permanently excluded pupils, those identified as close to permanent exclusion and those who cannot attend school because of health needs. There is one pupil referral unit that provides support across separate sites for pupils in key stage 1 to key stage 4. Four registered alternative education providers add additional capacity for children and young people who need support away from mainstream education. A small number of children and young people who are unwell attend an education health care needs unit. Some school-age children with SEND attend places in additionally resourced mainstream settings.

## **What is it like to be a child or young person with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) in this area?**

Children and young people with SEND experience variable quality of assessment and inconsistent support to meet their education, health and social care needs. The LAP is ambitious for children and young people with SEND, and some partnership work is well embedded. However, there is variability in the effectiveness of some services to swiftly identify and meet children and young people's needs.

For many children and young people, the overall quality and timeliness in issuing their education, health and care (EHC) plans, and their use across services, is inconsistent. New EHC plan assessments are seeing a reduction in waiting times, and the LAP is implementing recovery plans to tackle the existing backlog of EHC plan assessments. This includes investment in additional educational psychology capacity to further reduce assessment waiting times. Children and young people typically give professionals their views during direct work with them. However, their views and aspirations do not routinely feature in their EHC plans. In addition, some assessment information is historic, and some professionals' views are not consistently included in EHC plans. Generally, children and young people's EHC plans do not link consistently well to other support plans that they may have. This includes social care plans for children in need of help and protection and children in care. Some health practitioners are not aware that the children and young people they support have EHC plans or SEND support plans in school.

The LAP identifies and meets the needs of most children and young people with SEND early. However, for some, the lack of early assessment, identification of needs and subsequent access to the right support has led to disengagement, suspensions and exclusion from school. This is most evident as they transition from primary to secondary school. To support children and young people, some mainstream schools have additionally resourced provision. This helps to keep children and young people with SEND in their local primary and secondary schools. The LAP strategy to increase capacity to meet demand for places in AP and special schools is not consistently clear. However, when children and young people attend these settings, their needs are assessed effectively, and they quickly receive the support they need.

In this area, children and young people with SEND largely have good attendance at school and further education. Over time, their attendance is improving and closely matches the typical attendance for individuals with similar additional needs in England. The number of children and young people who are persistently absent from education is decreasing. This prepares them well for next steps in education, employment or training. Young people are supported in future planning effectively. They receive useful information, advice and guidance for their next steps. Practitioners create detailed assessments that inform an individual's transition arrangements. They coordinate links with social care for post-16 care packages to meet children and young people's needs as they move into adulthood.

Parents and carers state that their voice is mostly heard well. Some parents and carers

have seen a positive improvement in the support and services that their children receive because of the issues they raise. Children and young people feel valued, visible and included in their communities. They feel listened to by adults, but they would like more face-to-face opportunities to share their views. Many children and young people access youth clubs during the week and at weekends. They make their voice heard through the eXtreme Group and receive effective support through community hubs such as the Sjøvoll Centre. These successfully bring children and young people with SEND together to make new friends and develop their confidence. Children and young people build transferable skills so that they can participate in wider activities. For example, they visit places in Durham to participate in a range of indoor and outdoor experiences through integrating. This provides helpful short-break support for parents and carers.

## **What is the area partnership doing that is effective?**

- Collaborative leadership is strong across education, health and social care. LAP leaders prioritise SEND. For example, the LAP has jointly commissioned specialist roles such as a designated social care officer, a designated clinical officer and a project leader for SEND. This is a strength of the LAP work.
- The focus on early identification of need is a positive initiative across Durham, with several arrangements in place to provide support for families and schools to help recognise and meet SEND needs. Fifteen family hubs throughout the area host drop-in sessions run by the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Information and Advice Support Service (SENDIASS) and educational psychologists. Additionally, there are courses run by the family hubs, health staff and specialist inclusion support teams, including the Durham Portage Service. They provide regular access to professional support and guidance. Each hub has sensory spaces and offers additional outreach support for families. This support is highly valued by parents and carers.
- The Healthy Child Programme is delivered effectively. The 0-25 service delivers additional developmental checks to identify additional needs and offer support at the earliest opportunity. Two-year-old checks are integrated with early years providers whenever a child attends a setting. Dedicated and knowledgeable staff offer a range of support and interventions to support younger children.
- All therapy services offer open referral systems. This means children and young people and their families can access support directly. Waiting times for therapy services in Durham vary. However, the most urgent needs are prioritised. Children and young people and their families can access support while waiting, and their therapeutic needs are assessed accurately in a timely way.
- Schools and further education providers can access a range of guidance to support and develop children and young people. This includes support for emotional resilience and mental health, although there is a variable uptake of this offer. Children and young people can self-refer to the emotional resilience team. This team offers effective emotional well-being support to children and young people. Equally, children and young people with SEND are well prepared for next steps in education, employment and training through DurhamWorks and DurhamEnable.
- The children with disabilities social care team conducts thorough assessments of

disabled children's needs. Children have their needs quickly and accurately identified. For example, social workers identify any needs arising from disability or environmental issues, and when needs are identified, social workers make prompt referrals to services and ensure support is quickly put in place. Specialist services are brought into holistic planning as needed.

- Children and young people with complex medical needs access continuous support through the complex care nursing team. There is strong multi-agency working, and services are responsive to these individuals' needs. Residential placements for children in care are selected to ensure their SEND needs are met well.
- Across education, health and social care, planning for post-18 support for children and young people with complex SEND starts early. This ensures that there are no gaps or delays in the support and care that individuals receive. Detailed assessments inform transition arrangements and future care packages. These support an individual's needs as they move into adulthood.
- Early help workers and children with disabilities social workers are knowledgeable about the support available to children and young people and their families. Navigation workers ensure that support features in young people's future planning and continues into adulthood. For example, planning to support children with SEND as they approach adulthood starts when they become 14 years old. Navigation workers complete Care Act assessments and capacity assessments as needed. This ensures that young people who need continuing care and support from adult services post-18 have their care packages agreed in advance.
- The virtual school operates through a multi-disciplinary approach across education, health and social care. The LAP has invested in staffing capacity to support children who are in care and have SEND. This includes a dedicated educational psychologist.
- The LAP prioritises co-production. Children, young people and their families are represented at the Health and Wellbeing Board. They make frequent contributions locally through the Making Changes Together parent carer forum and the eXtreme Group. For example, children and young people have shared their experiences of the use of language around autism to inform guidance for professionals.
- Access to support and AP is supported effectively through four secondary school inclusion partnerships that support local area needs. Similarly, primary schools share their own inclusion partnership arrangements. The LAP has well-thought-out quality assurance processes to ensure AP providers meet LAP standards. The LAP has oversight of children and young people placed in AP. The provision is flexible to meet a range of demands, including day six provision. All movements in and out of AP are monitored by the LAP.

## What does the area partnership need to do better?

- Children and young people in Durham wait too long for neurodevelopmental assessments. In addition, some individuals experience lengthy waits for therapeutic support from child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). This mirrors the national picture. Swift support may only be available at crisis point. The most

vulnerable children and young people do not routinely benefit from accelerated neurodevelopmental assessments when needed. However, there is new investment and a detailed recovery plan from the LAP and Durham executive leaders to reduce waiting times for assessments and support.

- Schools generally identify children and young people's SEND at the earliest opportunity. However, for some individuals, the lack of early assessment of needs has led to parents and carers feeling that they need to make requests for EHC plan assessments to secure support for their child.
- The needs-led offer supports children and young people and their families while they are waiting for diagnostic assessment. However, practitioners' general understanding of this offer is inconsistent, and some are unclear of what support is available. The LAP has a comprehensive workforce development plan to improve practitioners' understanding of what support is available. The impact of this plan is too early to evaluate.
- Multi-agency groups audit EHC plans. Groups are well represented, and learning is shared across the LAP. However, learning from these audits has not consistently had a positive impact to improve the quality of EHC plans.
- The monitoring of the impact of new LAP strategic plans and policies that target support and resources is developing. However, some evaluation work to improve multi-agency support and provision for children and young people with SEND is carried out independently rather than jointly across agencies. This lessens its impact to improve multi-agency work.
- Children and young people's views are typically sought during direct work with them. However, their wishes and aspirations do not routinely feature in their EHC plans. This means that planning across education, health and social care is not always informed by what children and young people want to happen and how they feel.
- Children and young people with less complex SEND, who are working with social workers other than the children with disabilities team, receive inconsistent support. Their individual wider needs are not consistently recognised alongside their SEND in professionals' planning, for example the impact of neglect. As a result, some support offered may not be consistently appropriate or accessible.
- Occasionally, some services label children and young people and their families as 'hard to engage'. This leads to a lack of creative and innovative thinking to make services more appealing and accessible to children and young people and their families. The effect of some professionals' language has a negative impact on how some services engage with families. As a result, some services withdraw support through lack of engagement.
- The availability of specialist equipment in schools is an emerging challenge. Equipment is available locally, but some children and young people do not consistently benefit from its use. The LAP has plans to maximise the use of existing equipment across schools to ensure children receive the support they need to access education. The impact of these plans is too early to evaluate.
- Parents and carers describe their frustrations with the usefulness of the local offer

website. They acknowledge that many services and support systems exist, but users of the website cannot easily find them. As a result, some children and young people miss opportunities, adding to parents and carers' frustration.

- Preparation for adulthood across health services is variable. Different services follow a variety of service specifications. These state different ages to access a range of adult services. As a result, some services provide support at contrasting times. For example, children and young people aged between 16 and 25 who are supported by the dynamic support register and are open to a range of services do not consistently receive coordinated multi-agency support.

## Areas for improvement

Areas for improvement
The LAP should intensify its work to further improve EHC plan quality and assessment timeliness. It should ensure that EHC plans consistently and accurately reflect the needs of children and young people. It should ensure that all partner agencies contribute comprehensively with high-quality information and that all plans detail children and young people's voice, needs, aspirations and next steps effectively.
The LAP should continue to strengthen its work to further reduce the delays in accessing CAMHS and neurodevelopmental pathways across the age range of children and young people.
The LAP should ensure that children and young people and their families can access easily identifiable needs-led services. Informed practitioners should direct families to services that provide support, guidance and intervention at the earliest opportunity.
The LAP should further strengthen the monitoring and impact of strategic plans and policies to ensure that support and resources are consistently targeted to the children and young people and families that need it most.



## Local area partnership details

Local authority	Integrated care board
Durham County Council	North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board
John Pearce Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services	Samantha Allen Chief Executive of the Integrated Care Board
<a href="http://www.durham.gov.uk">www.durham.gov.uk</a>	<a href="https://northeastnorthcumbria.nhs.uk">https://northeastnorthcumbria.nhs.uk</a>
County Hall, Durham DH1 5UJ	Parkhouse Building, Baron Way, Kingmoor Park, Cumbria CA6 4SJ

## Information about this inspection

This inspection was carried out at the request of the Secretary of State for Education under section 20(1)(a) of the Children Act 2004.

The inspection was led by one of His Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) from Ofsted, with a team of inspectors including: one social care HMI and one Ofsted Inspector from education; a lead Children's Services Inspector from the Care Quality Commission (CQC); and two Children's Services Inspectors from the CQC.

## Inspection team

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