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Mr Mike Wyatt
Director of Children's Services, St Helens
Corporation Street
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Sarah O'Brien Interim Clinical Chief Executive, St Helens Clinical Commissioning Group
Joanne Davies Local Area Nominated Officer

Dear Mr Wyatt

Joint local area SEND inspection in St Helens

Between 29 January 2018 to 2 February 2018, Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) conducted a joint inspection of the local area of St Helens to judge the effectiveness of the area in implementing the disability and special educational needs reforms as set out in the Children and Families Act 2014.

The inspection was led by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors from Ofsted, with a team of inspectors including an Ofsted Inspector and a children's services inspector from the Care Quality Commission (CQC).

Inspectors spoke with children and young people who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities, parents and carers, local authority and National Health Service (NHS) officers. They visited a range of providers and spoke to leaders, staff and governors about how they were implementing the special educational needs reforms. Inspectors looked at a range of information about the performance of the local area, including the local area's self-evaluation. Inspectors met with leaders from the local area for health, social care and education. They reviewed performance data and evidence about the local offer and joint commissioning.

This letter outlines our findings from the inspection, including some areas of strengths and areas for further improvement.

Main findings

- Leaders have a deep and accurate understanding of the local area's strengths and weaknesses. Leaders acknowledge that the local area was late in starting to implement the reforms. However, progress in implementation has speeded up considerably over the past 12 months. Senior leaders, managers and frontline

staff have embraced the spirit of the reforms, putting children, young people and families at the heart of their plans.

- Leaders and managers are cognisant of the task that still lies ahead. They are taking urgent and decisive action to implement the further improvements needed.
- Senior leaders' ambitious plans for the transformation of St Helens have the potential to make a positive long-term impact on the lives of children and young people. However, children and young people who have SEN and/or disabilities do not have high enough priority within these plans. Leaders' priorities and the aspirations and expectations for these children and young people need to be made clearer.
- Strong appointments to key roles have already transformed the effectiveness of systems and structures across education, health and social care. Although it is early days, key stakeholders including parents, carers, children and young people and professionals are seeing first-hand the positive difference that these changes are making to their day-to-day experience.
- Communication has improved considerably across the local area. Senior leaders, managers and frontline staff, particularly in education and health, work well together to implement the reforms. The local area make sure that key stakeholders, such as Listen4Change (the parent carer forum), are kept up to date with their plans. Senior leaders pay heed to these stakeholders' views. Leaders and managers communicate when waiting times have increased or services are depleted. Stakeholders welcome this approach. However, parents and carers are not always kept in the loop. For example, parents shared their frustration about the long delay in the publication of the revised transport policy. Parents' uncertainty about whether they will be required to pay for their children's transport costs is causing them undue stress and anxiety.
- The timeliness and quality of education, health and care (EHC) plans have improved considerably. However, too often these focus heavily on education. Plans seen by inspectors do not capture essential information about children and young people's health and social care needs and the required provision to meet those needs.
- There is a small minority of parents who feel that their children and families have been let down by the local area. However, the majority of parents and carers are pleased with the help and support that families and children receive in St Helens. Some parents described the transformational effect this has had on their children's lives.
- St Helens has a well-established and active independent advice and support service. This service provides a wide range of effective support which is valued highly by parents and carers.
- Joint commissioning is a strength of the local area. The development of the neurodevelopmental pathway demonstrates the commitment of senior leaders and managers to work collaboratively. Arrangements for working together are strong, from senior managers through to frontline staff.

- Leaders have recognised the challenges of there being enough school places for pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities. Leaders have put the needs of children and young people at the heart of their plans to build capacity. The local area is not reliant on simply increasing the number of specialist places but has invested heavily in training and support for mainstream school staff. Consequently, across the local area, schools meet the needs of pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities better.
- The local area uses information intelligently to identify strengths and weaknesses in educational provision for pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities. The school effectiveness team ensures that school leaders are routinely and robustly challenged around outcomes and provision. Tailored support is helping schools to improve outcomes for this group.
- St Helens is embracing co-production (a way of working where children and young people, families and those that provide the services work together to create a decision or a service which works for them all). Across the local area parents, professionals, children and young people are working effectively together to devise and implement improvements. Co-production with Listen4Change has been key to success in developing the neurodevelopmental pathways. The learning from this work is now paying dividends with the development of the new local offer, occupational therapy (OT) services as well as improving EHC planning processes.
- The local area has responded swiftly to the recommendations from the recent children looked after and safeguarding inspection. For example, leaders have swiftly addressed the shortfalls in the school nursing service. School leaders and pupils who spoke to inspectors were generous in their praise for this change. Pupils told inspectors about how much they value the service offered by their school nurse.
- Parents, young people and professionals are unanimous in their concerns about the limited pathways to employment. Although the proportion of adults with learning difficulties and disabilities is above the national average, not enough is done to capitalise on the innovative work of schools and colleges in preparing these young people for working life.
- Staff within the local area take their safeguarding responsibilities seriously. Leaders, managers and frontline staff know children, young people and their families well. They follow up assiduously on any concerns. Robust systems and procedures ensure that children and young people who have SEN and/or disabilities are kept safe.

The effectiveness of the local area in identifying children and young people's SEN and/or disabilities

Strengths

- Many of the statutory duties as outlined in the code of practice are common, everyday practices in the local area. As a result, professionals work well together to identify the needs of children and young people in the local area.

- The innovative neurodevelopmental pathway has transformed the accessibility, timeliness and coordination of specialist services for children, young people and their families. Parents and carers agree that referrals are dealt with efficiently and appropriately.
- Parents and professionals agree that routine checks for babies and young children are used well to identify any emerging development needs. Effective partnerships between health and education professionals provide a timely and coordinated response to any concerns. Parents make good use of 'drop-in' services, including well-baby clinics at children's centres and coffee mornings, to seek advice and guidance.
- Children and young people who are looked after have their needs identified and assessed quickly. For example, those referred into the neurodevelopmental pathway are routinely prioritised for assessment by individual services. This means that they are assessed within six weeks of referral so they receive the support and help they need quickly
- The local area's comprehensive training programme ensures that staff in St Helens schools are well equipped to identify potential needs. The vast majority of special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) located in the settings and schools visited are well qualified. They keep staff up to date with developments, particularly in health and education, through frequent, informative meetings. Moreover, SENCOs benefit from the advice and guidance of a wealth of specialist support services, including educational psychology, through the termly SEN and disabilities planning and consultation meetings.

Areas for development

- Historical school census data identifies some inconsistencies in the identification of need. Senior leaders and managers have been slow to interrogate this data in order to identify and challenge weak practice. The recently appointed SEN and disabilities 0 to 25 manager has identified and addressed the issues, which were mostly administrative. However, this tardiness is delaying the availability of an up-to-date, accurate profile of children and young people's SEN and disabilities across the local area to inform planning.
- Too often, health and social care professionals are not invited to submit evidence for statutory assessment. At times, the evidence submitted is not up to date or the quality of information provided is poor. Moreover, these professionals do not have the opportunity to routinely review their contribution to the draft EHC plan or contribute to annual reviews. Consequently, provision is focused on meeting children and young people's needs during the school day. The SEN and disabilities 0 to 25 manager has taken urgent and decisive action to establish rigorous and robust quality assurance of EHC plans. This has improved the quality of the most recent plans.
- Poor communication causes parents and carers unnecessary anxiety. There are some examples of effective communication with parents when waiting times may

be extended or there are staff shortages. Parents appreciate the honesty from services when things are not working as well as they should. However, too often parents feel ill-informed about waiting times for appointments and provision for their child. This causes worry and frustration.

The effectiveness of the local area in meeting the needs of children and young people who have SEN and/or disabilities

Strengths

- Across the local area, leaders and managers ensure that the statutory duties, as set out in the code of practice, are at the heart of the work of services working with children and young people who have SEN and/or disabilities.
- Families awaiting assessment as part of the neurodevelopmental pathway are able to access a range of training and support. This helps them better understand their children's conditions and associated behaviours. Parents told inspectors about the positive impact of the range of training programmes offered. For example, some parents and carers reported that their child required no further support or help following the completion of these programmes.
- Community children's nursing teams ensure that young people who have SEN and/or disabilities are well supported as they transition from children's to adult services. These teams continue to support young people until appropriate and equivalent adult services are known to be in place for those young people at transition. This provides both young people and their parents with continuity at an anxious time.
- Community nurses provide high-quality training and support to teaching assistants who work with pupils who have complex medical needs. The nurses ensure that teaching assistants have the skills and expertise to carry out medical procedures during the school day. Moreover, ongoing support ensures that teaching assistants continue to carry out procedures competently. This approach ensures that there is minimal disruption to pupils' education.
- Portage services work closely with families to ensure that where possible, multiple appointments are arranged to take place at the same time. This reduces the need for those families to have to tell their story more than once. Furthermore, early intervention coupled with strong transition arrangements ensures that the youngest children get off to a good start in school.
- The local area's graduated response to meeting additional needs ensures a consistent approach across settings, schools and colleges. Rigorous and robust oversight by the local area ensures equity of provision for SEN in educational establishments across St Helens. Moreover, the application of transparent criteria means that enhanced funding goes to those pupils in greatest need.
- The parent carer forum, 'Listen4Change', co-produced the neurodevelopmental pathway from its earliest consideration to its implementation. Likewise, they and children and young people have been involved in the refresh of the local offer.

Consequently, the new local offer is more relevant and accessible to children, young people and their families.

- Pupils who have high levels of need are thriving in mainstream settings. Parents who spoke to inspectors are delighted by the quality of provision in the schools visited. School staff are working hand in hand with a range of professionals to ensure that these pupils are successful. Consequently, these pupils are making strong progress.
- The visual impairment service offers exceptional support to pupils, schools and families. Specialist staff go the extra mile to ensure that these children and young people are not disadvantaged in any way by their visual impairment.
- Senior leaders and managers have built capacity across the maintained and independent schools sector to provide sufficient places for pupils with complex needs. These leaders and managers have worked effectively with mainstream and special schools, both in and out of borough, as well as pupil referral units to ensure that there is consistently high-quality suitable provision for pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities.
- Colleges and special schools have worked together on a post-16 offer to establish a variety of accredited programmes, alongside vocational, independent living and community experiences that prepare young people well for adult life. These accredited programmes are endorsed by local and national employers and have led to offers of permanent employment for some young people. Young people value the confidence this gave them, with one student reporting that the experience 'made me become more of a person'.
- The local area ensures that it carries out frequent, comprehensive checks on those pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities who are electively home educated. The responsible officer keeps a close eye on the personal development and well-being of these children as well as their academic progress.

Areas for development

- The local area dragged its heels in appointing a Designated Clinical Officer (DCO). This has contributed to the delays in the implementation of the SEN and disabilities reforms. The recently appointed interim DCO has made considerable inroads to drive forward the SEN and disabilities agenda, not only in health but also across multi-agency partners.
- The local area's short-break provision is ineffective. There are very few activities available in the local area specifically for children and young people who have SEN and/or disabilities. In particular, parents of older young people are frustrated by the shortage of personal assistants and the scarcity and lack of suitability of overnight respite care.
- Recent capacity issues in the school nursing services and child and adolescent mental health service have had a negative impact on the timeliness and quality of the mandatory health reviews for children looked after.

The effectiveness of the local area in improving outcomes for children and young people who have SEN and/or disabilities

Strengths

- The range of programmes offered by speech and language therapy (SALT) and OT promote early identification of need. Parents and carers who attend the programmes understand better how well their children are progressing, both socially and physically. These short courses improve outcomes for children and young people at an early stage. More than half of children referred to one of the SALT programmes do not need further referral.
- Young children are acquiring the crucial communication and language skills to get them off to a good start in the early years. The innovative Books and Language Unite St Helens service promotes the development of oral speech, language and communication skills successfully. In addition, St Helens' schools library service develops language and literacy skills through a successful reading for pleasure strategy.
- Parents, carers and schools who spoke to inspectors consistently reported that children make a successful transition into primary school from early years settings and from primary into secondary school. Parents, carers and schools cited coordinated planning and support by professionals as key to this success.
- Attendance rates for children and young people who have SEN and/or disabilities are improving. The proportion of children and young people who have EHC plans who are persistently absent is now below the national average for this group of pupils. Furthermore, pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities without EHC plans attend well. Their attendance is above the national average for this group of pupils. Consequently, these pupils take advantage of the improved provision for SEN and/or disabilities in St Helens schools.
- Fewer children who have SEN and/or disabilities are excluded from school than is the case nationally. School leaders across the local area work well together to prevent exclusions. The local area now offers a range of options to support those pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities at risk of exclusion. This includes managed moves to provide a 'fresh start', placements in the pupil referral units as well as intervention by the behaviour support team.
- Comprehensive information gathered by the school effectiveness team provides an up-to-date, accurate evaluation of the effectiveness of provision for pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities across colleges, schools and settings. This information informs timely and robust challenge to those providers where outcomes for pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities are less than good.
- The virtual headteacher for children looked after closely scrutinises the quality of personal education plans to ensure that additional funding for these pupils is used wisely. She makes sure that there is consistency and coherence across the range of plans for those children looked after who have SEN and/or disabilities so that these children get the help and support they need. Consequently, there are

marked improvements for this group, particularly in their progress in writing at key stage 2 and reading at the end of key stage 1.

- Comprehensive support packages for the most vulnerable children and young people who have SEN and/or disabilities make sure that they move on to suitable provision post-16. Meticulous monitoring and tracking enable key partners to keep a close eye on these young people’s progress in preparation for adulthood. As a result, almost all of these young people sustain education, employment or training when they leave school.

Areas for improvement

- There is a disconnect between the aspirations and ambitions for all children and young people across St Helens and those who have SEN and/or disabilities. Senior leaders and managers across health, social care and education have not agreed the key performance indicators for children and young people who have SEN and/or disabilities. Consequently, there is no consistent view of how the implementation of reforms is having an impact on outcomes for children and young people who have SEN and/or disabilities.
- Parents, carers and young people are frustrated by the poor provision for young people who have SEN and/or disabilities aged 18 to 25 in St Helens. Parents and carers lament the limited choice for education, the dearth of supported internships and lack of suitable leisure opportunities. This hinders the ability of young people who have SEN and/or disabilities to realise their potential as they move into adulthood.

Yours sincerely

Pippa Jackson Maitland
Her Majesty’s Inspector

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Cc: DfE (Department for Education)
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