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Clare Henderson, Director of Integration, Islington Directorate, North Central London
Clinical Commissioning Group
Candy Holder, Local Area Nominated Officer

Dear Ms Duffy and Ms Henderson

Joint area SEND inspection in Islington

Between 8 November 2021 and 12 November 2021, Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) conducted a joint inspection of the local area of Islington to judge the effectiveness of the area in implementing the special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) reforms as set out in the Children and Families Act 2014.

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

Inspectors spoke with children and young people with SEND, 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 SEND reforms. Inspectors looked at a range of information about the performance of the area, including the area's self-evaluation. Inspectors met with leaders for health, social care and education. They reviewed performance data and evidence about the local offer and joint commissioning.

In reaching their judgements, inspectors took account of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on SEND arrangements in the area. Inspectors considered a range of information about the impact of the pandemic and explored how the area's plans and actions had been adapted as a result.

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

Main Findings

- Area leaders, including council members, are fully committed to providing the very best for children and young people with SEND. Leaders are dedicated and ambitious.
- Leaders are focused on continually improving services in Islington. The area's joint commissioning arrangements put children and young people's needs first. Strong, strategic leadership brings together well-established teams across education, health and social care. Working together, their focus is on ensuring children and young people quickly receive the services they need. One successful example of this is the area's work to redesign services to support children and young people's social, emotional and mental health.
- Leaders know what is working well in the area and what needs to improve further. Leaders use data very effectively to keep their knowledge of the area's context up to date. This means that all priorities for improvement are based on the area's current or projected needs.
- Despite the challenges that the area has faced through the pandemic, leaders have sustained their commitment. Leaders have remained true to their values and maintained the momentum of continuous improvement. Throughout this time, they ensured that the area's most vulnerable children, young people and families were continuously in sight.
- Leaders take seriously the views of parents and young people. Partnerships with parents and young people are meaningful and effective. Leaders actively involve parents and young people in shaping the area's policies as well as practices. The 'Parent Charter' is an example of parents working together with area leaders to agree a set of expectations and principles that all can follow.
- The roles of the designated medical officer and designated clinical officer were established at the start of the reforms in 2014. These postholders work alongside the area's designated social care officer and other leaders to oversee arrangements for identifying and meeting the needs of children and young people.
- Most schools in Islington make sure that children and young people with SEND are made to feel welcome. However, some do not. In some schools, inconsistencies in how well children and young people's needs are understood and met lead to frustrations for parents. In secondary schools, the rates of fixed-term exclusions of children and young people with SEND are too high. The local authority has identified these issues. Leaders have credible plans to put things right.
- Many parents speak of very positive experiences and productive partnerships with schools and early years settings. Many parents praised the efforts of school

staff, including special educational needs coordinators (SENcos), in supporting their children's educational needs. However, some parents were less positive. Some parents spoke of poor communication from the area and the settings their children attend. Leaders have identified the need to strengthen communication with parents because it is too inconsistent.

- Some children and young people wait too long for some specialist services. Waiting times for specialist autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) and mental health interventions are lengthy. Leaders make sure that while children and young people are waiting, they receive support from a range of other services. Leaders monitor the waiting lists so that those with the most significant needs are prioritised.
- Health providers are experiencing significant recruitment challenges. This has affected the delivery of some services. Professionals have developed innovative ways of working to lessen the impact on children and young people.

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

Strengths

- Procedures to identify children's needs in the early years are very well embedded. The 'Bright Start' centres across the area bring together professionals from all sectors. Services here are located 'under one roof'. This means that staff can quickly access advice and expertise from different therapists and specialists. Parents praised the high-quality, joined-up approach to assessing their children's needs in the early years.
- There is a strong focus on developing staff knowledge and expertise. Leaders across education, health and care provide an extensive training programme for all early years practitioners and schools. The Disabled Children's Advice Team offers guidance and consultations to all health practitioners. This means that even when children and young people are not receiving direct support, they are still able to benefit from specialist expertise.
- Children and young people under the age of 18 receive comprehensive support while they wait for a diagnosis of ASD and/or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). While waiting times for some specialist services are too long for children, most 18- to 25-year-olds wait only four weeks for a diagnosis of ADHD.
- Parents and school leaders hold specialist services in high regard. Schools make effective use of expertise from specialist provision, for example in identifying pupils' needs. The team of educational psychologists provides timely and effective support to schools in identifying pupils' needs and training staff.

- The care needs of vulnerable children and young people with SEND are identified effectively. Children and young people benefit very positively from the work of the virtual school. Leaders make sure that care plans and personal education plans align closely with education, health and care (EHC) plans. This makes review meetings useful and efficient. All the required professionals meet to identify and review children and young people's needs.
- The Young People's Panel has produced resources to help children and young people with SEND in acute health settings. This panel worked with the emergency department in a local hospital to ensure that there is a quiet space for children and young people with SEND. This has helped to reduce the stress or anxiety these children and young people experience when accessing healthcare.
- Area leaders have clear oversight of children and young people with SEND who are electively home educated. Advisory teachers are assigned to each family and make sure that these children and young people receive support at home.
- Leaders work effectively with colleges and post-16 providers. They ensure that these settings have the information they need when pupils transfer from one phase to the next. Colleges praise the work of Islington's SEND team. This is because case officers know young people and their families very well. They ensure that EHC plans are up to date and give a clear and accurate description of the young person's needs. Case workers from the SEND team liaise closely with college staff to make sure that needs are identified and understood.

Areas for development

- Most schools in the area welcome children and young people with SEND very readily. They identify emerging needs swiftly and put appropriate programmes in place. However, the welcome in some other schools is less inclusive. They are slower to identify and meet the needs of pupils who need SEND support. This is a cause of frustration for parents.
- Most parents confirmed very positive experiences of early and swift identification of their children's needs. However, some said that communication with the area and their children's schools is inconsistent. Not all parents understood what support their children are entitled to and when. This is usually as a result of ineffective communication.
- Until the start of the pandemic, the proportion of EHC assessments that were completed within the required timescale was improving. The COVID-19 pandemic affected this. Although the rate of completion is improving again, only 80% of EHC assessments are completed within the 20-week timescale.

This means that some children and young people wait for too long to have their needs assessed.

- Health visitors do not provide an antenatal contact to all expectant parents. This is one of the mandatory contacts within the healthy child programme. Consequently, opportunities to identify and address needs at the earliest stages are sometimes missed.
- Although developmental reviews at age two are conducted by health visiting teams and by early years settings, the assessments are not always integrated. This means that some children do not benefit from an integrated approach to assessing their development.

The effectiveness of the local area in meeting the needs of children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities

Strengths

- Babies and young children with additional needs are able to access nursery provision from six months of age as part of the 'early learning opportunities' scheme. Practitioners at these settings are well trained and have appropriate specialist SEND expertise to support children and families.
- Area SENCOs work closely with early years settings and schools. Regular meetings for SENCOs are well attended. Representatives from education, health and social care come to these meetings. Services available to schools have a high profile as a result. These meetings complement the extensive training in meeting needs that is offered to school staff. Additional training and support for new SENCOs is particularly popular.
- There are clear procedures in place to ensure that parents and professionals contribute to drafting and reviewing EHC plans. Area leaders oversee the process effectively. They check that all reports from professionals are submitted on time. Well-established assurance processes ensure that EHC plans are suitable.
- EHC plans are of a consistently high quality. All plans focus on preparation for adulthood. This means that no matter what the child's age, professionals consider future pathways, independence and physical, social and emotional well-being. Practitioners from a range of settings agree that EHC plans have improved over time. Plans provide an up-to-date and clear picture of each child and young person's needs.
- The strong and well-established joint-working arrangements extend also to EHC plans. Health and social care information, including details about short breaks, is integrated, up to date and appropriate. When changes are needed

to provision, including at the time of annual reviews or emergency reviews, leaders make sure that EHC plans are updated.

- A specific service for children with disabilities means that these children and their families receive the specialist support and advice that they need. The team directs parents to additional services, such as short breaks. Leaders make sure that flexible-funding arrangements are in place to help families who would not typically meet the thresholds for short breaks.
- School leaders and parents are extremely positive about the support that is provided by specialist settings. Referrals to these services have increased significantly over the past two years. The work of special schools, including through outreach services, makes a real and demonstrable difference to children's and young people's lives and achievements. The support available in mainstream schools for those with ASD and social, emotional and mental health needs is particularly effective.
- The area-wide approach to meeting children and young people's social, emotional and mental health needs is strong. All requests for services are checked by a mental health practitioner. This ensures that right from the start, decisions are made about which service is best placed to meet the child's or young person's needs. All schools have a dedicated practitioner to support pupils' mental health. These practitioners work alongside teachers from special schools to provide the right support to children and young people with SEND in schools. Although waiting times for some initial assessments are long, interventions are put in place in schools while children and young people are waiting.
- The sensory specialist team is very successful at working with schools to support pupils' needs. Speech and language therapists provide training for staff in schools. This enables staff to deliver sessions to support speech and language needs when the therapists are not in school.
- During the pandemic, some of the partial school closures meant that therapists were not able to meet face-to-face with children and young people. Therapists developed innovative ways of working so that they could continue to meet needs. The use of online platforms, for example, was popular with working parents because they could access support easily. These new ways of working will continue alongside face-to-face support.
- Leaders make sure that children and young people's care needs are understood. The 'Bright Futures' team offers tailored support to families. The 'rapid response offer' is helpful to families who need short-term support and advice. Leaders make sure that the short breaks offer is appropriate. Leaders have invested additional funding in short breaks for children and young people with ASD and challenging behaviours.

- School nurses, speech and language therapists and child and adult mental health service clinicians are in place in pupil referral units and in specialist settings.
- The targeted support team makes sure that young people with SEND who are known to youth offending services are well supported. This team works closely with other professionals, including the integrated gangs team, to help keep young people safe. The work of the virtual school, together with Islington's SEND team, is very effective. Children looked after benefit from timely assessment and support.
- Health professionals take into account all the factors that might affect children and young people's well-being. For example, they routinely consider the impact of housing and finances and work effectively with families to address these issues.
- There is a robust and integrated approach to supporting children and young people with complex medical and physical needs. Professionals, such as occupational therapists, physiotherapists and nurses, ensure that families receive consistent and compassionate care in hospital and at home.
- Transition planning is strong. Parents reported that when their children move from early years to school and from school to college, the transition is smooth and effective. At annual reviews, professionals consider future pathways to ensure that these are well matched to individual needs. Partnerships between the Islington's SEND team and schools are very positive. School leaders spoke highly of the support they receive from case workers, for example. They work well together to support pupils when they move from one phase of their education to the next.
- Many parents valued the work of the special educational needs and/or disabilities information, advisory and support service (SENDIASS). The members of the team tailor their approach to young people and have successfully encouraged more young people to use the service.
- The parent-carer forum (PCF) offers a range of services to parents. Information-sharing events, such as coffee mornings and forum days, include opportunities to hear from guest speakers. Representatives of the area attend these meetings to answer parents' questions and seek their views. Representatives of SENDIASS and the PCF are involved in the area's decision-making. Their views are taken seriously, and they feel listened to.
- Leaders' ambition to raise awareness of SEND extends to a wide range of professionals. For example, education and care staff have provided training to magistrates. The members of the children's nursing team have shared their expertise with transport staff. Consequently, more professionals are knowledgeable about children and young people with SEND.

Areas for development

- Children and young people wait too long for specialist ASD and mental health interventions.
- When they transfer from children's to adult services, a small number of young people with complex needs have to change medical devices and/or equipment. This is because the medical devices and/or equipment that adult services use are sometimes different. This causes unnecessary stress to young people and their families because they have to learn new procedures and how to work new medical devices.
- Due to recruitment issues, some direct speech and language therapy has stopped. There are longer waiting times for some occupational therapy in mainstream schools.
- Some parents have not heard about or used the local offer website. Although many parents get advice and information from the settings their children attend, or through the PCF, others do not. Some parents said that they did not know what is available to them because they are not given clear guidance.

The effectiveness of the local area in improving outcomes for children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities

Strengths

- The area's 'fairer together aims' underpin the area's drive to ensure that all children and young people are healthy, achieve highly and go to suitable education, employment or training when they leave school.
- The 'outcomes framework' makes clear the expectations of professionals in planning children and young people's next steps. An effective 'transition to adulthood' protocol has been co-produced with young people to ensure their move to adult services is well planned. Youth careers advisers attend annual review meetings. They provide support and guidance to staff and young people. Young people with SEND achieve highly in post-16 settings. The proportion of young people in education, employment or training has been consistently high.
- Children and young people spoke positively about the support they receive in school. In most schools, there is a strong focus on bringing professionals together to share their expertise in order to support pupils' outcomes.
- Children and young people with SEND achieve well. Leaders monitor outcomes information closely. They provide well-planned support to schools in order to address any inconsistencies or concerns. Leaders have allocated additional funding and provided targeted support to improve outcomes in

secondary schools further. The 'Upward Bound' project focuses on specific children and young people, including those with SEND, and has made a positive difference to their individual outcomes.

- Most children and young people with SEND attend school regularly. Leaders work with school leaders to understand and analyse any patterns in attendance rates.
- The '11 by 11' programme is well established. It enables all children and young people to take part in eleven free cultural events or experiences by the end of Year 11. Children and young people with SEND are prioritised and given the support they need to be fully involved in this.
- Short breaks are used effectively to support families. A wide range of after-school and holiday schemes are available. This enables children and young people to access activities they enjoy and provides them with opportunities to develop confidence and self-esteem through a range of experiences.

Areas for improvement

- The proportion of fixed-term exclusions for children and young people with SEND is too high in secondary schools.
- The variety of post-16 options for those with the most complex needs is limited. Individual schools and training providers do what they can to find future pathways for these young people, but there lacks a systemic and coordinated approach to this.
- Some parents and carers of children and young people over the age of 16 felt that their children are not helped well enough to develop their independence. The approach to supporting children and young people's independence to access local amenities and leisure activities in their social time lacks coordination. This leaves parents feeling concerned about their children's safety when travelling to and from these activities.

Yours sincerely

Gary Rawlings
Her Majesty's Inspector

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