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David Gallagher, Chief Officer, Tees Valley Clinical Commissioning Group
David Watson, Local Area Nominated Officer

Dear Mr Stroyan and Mr Gallagher

Joint local area SEND inspection in Darlington

Between 24 and 28 January 2022, Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC), conducted a joint inspection of the local area of Darlington 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 from Ofsted, with a team of inspectors, including another Her Majesty's Inspector 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.

As a result of the findings of this inspection and in accordance with the Children Act 2004 (Joint Area Reviews) Regulations 2015, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI) has determined that a Written Statement of Action (WSOA) is required because of significant areas of weakness in the area's practice. HMCI has also determined that the local authority and the area's clinical commissioning group (CCG) are jointly responsible for submitting the written statement to Ofsted.

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

- While there are some signs of improvement recently, over time, the area has not worked effectively across education, health and care services to ensure children and young people with SEND achieve consistently positive outcomes.
- There are examples of successful integrated provision, demonstrating leaders' forethought and creativity. For example, currently, workers from the health and well-being and child psychology teams are seconded to the youth justice service (YJS). This is helping to identify the emerging needs of young people with SEND. Additionally, this approach is improving the support between YJS workers and the young people who enter the justice system. However, since the 2014 reforms, there have been limited examples such as this that demonstrate a coordinated approach that consistently promotes the well-being of children and young people with SEND, or improves the quality of special educational needs provision.
- Many parents and carers feel that their child has not been supported well enough to prepare them for adulthood. Leaders' own self-evaluation and inspection evidence confirm this is a significant area of weakness in Darlington.
- Academic outcomes for children and young people with SEND show some signs of improvement. However, over time, children and young people with SEND have not achieved well or attained highly, particularly at the end of key stage 4.
- Over the period of the reforms, too many children and young people with SEND have missed school. This includes those who are persistently absent and those suspended from school. Leaders do not understand why many children and young people are suspended, or are persistently absent, from school, particularly secondary school.
- Education, health, and care (EHC) plans do not identify the changing needs and aspirations of children and young people consistently. Despite some recent improvements, current EHC plans do not demonstrate that appropriate consideration has been given to a child or young person's physical, mental and social development.

- Opportunities for children and young people with SEND to have a say in the services and support offered to them are underdeveloped. Projects and initiatives are not aligned to their aspirations closely enough.
- School and area leaders value the work of the educational psychology service. Leaders state that the support offered by the service during and since the period of the COVID-19 restrictions was of particular importance. The service provides strong support in schools linked to dyslexia, emotional literacy and the curriculum.
- Staff turnover and difficulties in appointing to leadership positions in the local authority have delayed and/or negatively affected the implementation of the reforms. Partners, parents and carers say that with each new or interim appointment, more time has been lost or initiatives have stalled that aim to improve the quality of provision for children and young people with SEND.
- The parent and carer forum (PCF) is a vital source of information and inspiration for parents and carers in Darlington. The PCF plays an active role in shaping the vision and direction of SEND provision, working together with area leaders on a regular basis.
- Transitions between settings, specifically into nursery and between primary and secondary education, are improving as a result of focused activity across services. For example, the effective implementation of the healthy child programme and the sharing of information between health visitors and nursery settings is helping nursery staff meet children's additional learning needs early.
- In schools, area leaders are working successfully with staff and special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) to help improve children and young people's confidence, self-esteem, and communication and language skills as children move from primary to secondary education.
- Opportunities to participate in supported employment services, apprenticeships, traineeships and supported internships in Darlington are limited for young people with SEND. While this has been affected by the pandemic, there is no coordinated or planned approach to improve this aspect of provision. The lived experience of a young person in Darlington post-19 is, in part, dependent on their education or training placement and the advice they may or may not receive.

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

Strengths

- Leaders have improved the support provided to teachers and other professionals in relation to the graduated approach. Since 2018, leaders have provided

training and resources that ensure professionals, parents and carers can identify and provide for children and young people's additional needs consistently. The PCF report that this approach has helped parents and carers understand more clearly the support and help their children are likely to receive.

- Early years providers say that staff in the early years inclusion team build close working relationships with families and settings. The inclusion officers are knowledgeable and experienced. They help providers develop support plans and provision for children with emerging additional needs. Although some parents and carers would like more support during their child's formative years, the work of the early years inclusion team is helping to ensure more children with SEND get the right support from the right people at the right time.
- Multi-disciplinary working among health practitioners is a strong feature in Darlington. The designated clinical officer (DCO) works closely with health services to help staff identify the needs of children and young people with SEND swiftly. The work of public health nurses is assisted by open access to referral systems across partner agencies. This is allowing staff to make meaningful onward referrals, for example to the continence team and to different therapies.
- Leaders continue to develop a shared 'SEND dashboard' across partner agencies. The dashboard includes qualitative and quantitative information relating to the needs of children and young people with SEND. Leaders are improving the way that they evaluate the information available to them. This joined-up approach is helping to improve the way leaders identify the emerging needs of individual children and young people with SEND as well as highlighting the bigger picture of SEND across Darlington.
- Leaders have provided training for SENCOs linked to EHC plans. This training highlights the assessment process more clearly. It is helping to improve cross-agency working and ensure written outcomes for each child or young person with SEND are personal and link to their aspirations. The proportion of EHC plans issued within the statutory 20-week period is above average.

Areas for development

- Many parents and carers are frustrated. They describe a running battle to have their voices heard and to persuade professionals across different agencies that their child needs support with their learning, health or care needs. Furthermore, parents and carers must tell their story many times, to many people. The tell-it-once approach is not well embedded in Darlington.
- Leaders have improved systems and processes relating to EHC plans. Professionals from education, health and care work together more closely of late. Their collective efforts are ensuring that EHC needs assessments and annual reviews are more robust. EHC plans now include more accurate information about the nature, extent and context of the child or young person's

SEND needs. However, the aspirations of children and young people are not considered in full. Leaders and professionals do not sufficiently reflect on, improve or amend SEND provision as a child or young person matures or develops over time.

- School leaders and other professionals describe a changing landscape in respect to children and young people's SEND in Darlington. Recently, and as the country emerges from the pandemic, more children and young people are presenting with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs. There is more to do to ensure leaders understand and respond to children and young people's needs well enough. This includes leaders' efforts to identify children and young people's additional needs to inform the area's future plans across health, social care, public health and children's services.

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

Strengths

- The PCF reaches over 500 families currently. In addition to the weekly meetings at the local theatre, members of the PCF are working with parents and carers at individual school 'hubs'. Parents and carers say the regular meetings are a 'fabulous' source of support. During the period of restrictions linked to the pandemic, the PCF worked closely with the child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS). This helped to support families experiencing issues linked to the sleep, routines and behaviour of children and young people at home.
- A multi-agency group meets regularly to discuss individual and wider support associated with young people's care needs as they move into adulthood. The transition to the adult social care team also provides guidance and training to social workers. This helps professionals assess and meet the care and support needs of young people early, as they move to adult services.
- Leaders have secured additional funding for children and young people with SEND. For example, funding to support children and young people's care needs was used during the pandemic to increase the number of short breaks available and to provide sports equipment for families to use at home. While attending short-break provision, children and young people participate in art awards, and attend outings to the theatre and other cultural venues. This improves social awareness, confidence and cultural appreciation for many children and young people with SEND.
- Leaders from the area meet as part of a 'vulnerable pupil panel' to review and discuss strategies to support children and young people, many with SEND, who have been or are at risk of suspension from school. Leaders have been successful in ensuring that pupils do not miss long periods of education as they

move from one setting to another, including when referred to the pupil referral unit.

- The mediation process linked to EHC plan disagreements is well established. Leaders commission an external agency to provide mediation services for parents and carers who may be dissatisfied with the EHC plan process. The number of mediations taking place is consistently below the national average, as is the number of cases that lead to an appeal to the first-tier tribunal.
- During the pandemic, the DCO, together with paediatricians across Darlington, identified children and families who might require face-to-face support as opposed to telephone or video contact. For example, initial assessments were, where appropriate, conducted face-to-face so that the assessing paediatrician could understand the needs of the child being assessed and their family better.
- Therapy services routinely obtain feedback from children and young people with SEND and their families. During the pandemic, practitioners developed online resources to support children and young people who use speech and language therapies. This included self-support procedures that could be used by parents and carers with their children at home. This ensured that children and young people with speech and language difficulties continued to receive support despite being unable to attend face-to-face therapy at health settings.
- Leaders have jointly developed a new approach to supporting children and young people with SEND who may have a neurodevelopmental condition. This, recent 'needs-led' approach, is ensuring that multi-agency partners work collaboratively to assess children and young people, and identify services to meet needs. This includes access to support at the right time and a range of self-help guides. The neurodevelopmental pathway is helping to ensure children and young people with SEND receive support earlier. This approach is not well understood by all professionals. As a result, the effect of this new approach is not as strong as it might be.

Areas for development

- Parents, carers and some school leaders are unclear about the local area plans to ensure children and young people with SEND, including those with an EHC plan, receive appropriate support in school to meet their needs. Some school leaders do not believe that additional resourced provision across the area is utilised effectively or promoted well enough.
- There are limited opportunities and support for young people with SEND in Darlington to help them explore different employment opportunities, live independently, be healthy in adulthood or play an active role in society and their community. The Ofsted parent questionnaire highlighted that three out of four parents and carers feel that their child has not been supported to prepare for

adulthood well by the area. Leaders also highlighted preparation for adulthood as a significant weakness.

- Parents told inspectors that they have experienced long waiting times for some health services such as CAMHS. Leaders are addressing these concerns collectively. They are including parents and carers in discussions about practical solutions to the problem. This has led to a reduction in waiting times and additional appointments being made available at weekends.
- Many parents and carers do not know what services and which support is available in Darlington for children and young people with SEND. Many parents and carers have not heard of the local offer; the area's online service that describes the support that is available for 0- to 25-year olds with SEND. This is contributing to parents' and carers' frustrations.
- There is more to do to ensure that EHC plans accurately reflect children and young people's needs. EHC plans do not consistently contain sufficient detail for a plan to be delivered and reviewed. Leaders identified this shortcoming recently through new quality assurance processes.
- There are some opportunities for children looked after or care leavers with SEND to socialise with and meet others, including at the 'Darlo Care Crew'. Leaders have not actively publicised the group. Opportunities to encourage more children and young people with experience of the care system to socialise, meet new friends and improve their confidence around others are limited.
- Some children and young people with SEND receive effective careers advice and guidance. This is usually because of more specific detail in an EHC plan or because school leaders have appointed their own careers leader or advisor. However, many children and young people receiving support for SEND without an EHC plan do not receive focused careers guidance. Some do not know about opportunities beyond school and college. Children and young people with SEND said they want more support to understand the world of work, further education opportunities and training, including apprenticeships, clearly.

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

Strengths

- Many children and young people attending schools with additional resourced provision, achieve well. Teachers, staff and professionals in these settings know the needs of children and young people with SEND in detail. They ensure that children and young people with SEND are inspired and receive individual care and support to do well.

- There are examples of carefully planned initiatives, aimed at supporting the most vulnerable children and young people with SEND, including girls from the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) communities. For example, professionals from the educational psychology service organised additional careers advice for a group of girls from the GRT community, many who required additional support with their learning, having not been in education for some time. At the end of the project, 14 girls went on to further education or training.
- There is effective oversight of children and young people's continence needs across Darlington. For example, following investment, a continence expert now maintains oversight of a child's needs, assessing them on a regular basis to ensure that the supply of continence equipment is appropriate to their development. This ensures that children who experience bladder and bowel problems receive effective treatment and management of their continence needs.
- There are examples of a personalised approach to improving outcomes for young people with SEND. For example, leaders have worked closely with education providers to allow those beyond statutory school age to remain at specialist providers and complete courses where the pandemic has impacted on course completion.
- There are a variety of support services available across Darlington to improve outcomes for children and young people living with social, emotional and mental health difficulties. Online counselling services, school nurses and educational psychologists are available to children and young people with SEND and CAMHS provides training for practitioners. Children in primary schools with SEND value the one-to-one discussions, both in-person and virtually.

Areas for improvement

- Leaders do not use information to plan, provide and review what services are available to children and young people with SEND and their families well enough. This includes using information purposefully to inform decisions and monitor the impact of support on the lived experience of children with SEND and their families. Over time, children and young people with SEND have not had their needs met well consistently.
- Published information highlights that children and young people with SEND are achieving more strongly at school than in the past. However, for too long, children and young people with SEND have not achieved well. Young people with SEND miss school too much due to a mixture of absence and suspension from school. This, in part, means that too many children and young people with SEND are not prepared for their next steps in employment, education or training.

- Leaders told inspectors that they know more work is needed to ensure young people with SEND move into appropriate employment. Young people told inspectors that this is a particular frustration for them. They want more information, opportunities and support to do well after school and college. While the proportion of young people with SEND moving into education, employment and training is increasing gradually, not enough young people receiving support for SEND without an EHC plan move into employment, education, or training.
- It remains difficult for many paediatric services, such as occupational therapies, to transition young people with SEND into adult services with the same level of support once they reach 18. Although this is recognised by leaders, practitioners told inspectors of their frustrations in finding similar adult service provision for these young people which can impact on parents and carers who all too often describe the process as a 'cliff edge'.
- Opportunities for children and young people with SEND to learn how to travel independently are limited. While some children and young people do receive support in this area from their school or education setting, the offer varies across Darlington. Some children and young people with SEND continue to rely on others to move around the area and beyond. This prevents them from developing personal skills and confidence as they prepare for adulthood.

The inspection raises significant concerns about the effectiveness of the area.

The area is required to produce and submit a WSOA to Ofsted that explains how it will tackle the following areas of significant weakness:

- The ineffectiveness of meeting the needs of children and young people with SEND and the impact of this on their outcomes.
- Poor preparation for adulthood and post-19 opportunities for children and young people with SEND.

Yours sincerely

Lee Elliott
Her Majesty's Inspector

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