

## Area SEND inspection of Oxfordshire Local Area Partnership

Inspection dates: 13 to 21 July 2023

Dates of previous inspection: 14 to 17 October 2019

### Inspection outcome

There are widespread and/or systemic failings leading to significant concerns about the experiences and outcomes of children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), which the local area partnership must address urgently.

A monitoring inspection will be carried out within approximately 18 months. The next full reinspection will be within approximately 3 years.

As a result of this inspection, HMCI requires the local area partnership to prepare and submit a priority action plan (area SEND) to address the identified areas for priority action.

### Information about the local area partnership

Oxfordshire County Council and Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Integrated Care Board (ICB) are jointly responsible for the planning and commissioning of services for children and young people with SEND in Oxfordshire.

The commissioning of health services changed across England in 2022. In Oxfordshire, the responsibility for health services passed from Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) to the Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West ICB on 1 July 2022. There have been more recent changes to some senior leadership posts in the local area partnership. These include the appointment of a new chief executive for the ICB and the recent appointment of an interim Director of Children's Services for Oxfordshire County Council, who has stepped up to this role since being in Oxfordshire since 2022.

Oxfordshire County Council commissions a range of alternative provision for children or young people, including for those who cannot attend school due to social, emotional, and mental health and medical needs, or for those who are at risk of or have been permanently excluded. Many of these places are commissioned at Meadowbrook College and the Oxfordshire Hospital School.

## **What is it like to be a child or young person with SEND in this area?**

The experiences of children and young people in Oxfordshire depend on who they meet along their journey. If dedicated professionals recognise their needs early on, collaborate with others effectively and are then able to access the right support, they are one of the few whose needs are met. Sadly, this is too rare due to long-standing failings in local partnership arrangements. For most children, young people and their families, their experience is one of confusion and delay, alongside frustration that their presence and their voice are not listened to or valued. Consequently, many do not receive the right support or have their needs met effectively.

Conversely, children and young people who experience the pockets of stronger multi-agency working thrive. Where they encounter these dedicated practitioners, their quality of life is improved. As one young person commented, 'I now have a life worth living.' However, far too many children and young people are lost in the system. The processes that are intended to support them hinder them.

Children's and young people's needs are not consistently identified accurately or assessed in a timely and effective way right from the start. Where they are involved, early years settings, health visitors and school nurses do their best to identify and respond to emerging needs in babies, children and young people. However, there are lengthy waiting times for help and leaders have not acted effectively enough to ensure that appropriate support is available to mitigate the negative impact of excessive waiting times. While recent service changes are being implemented in some health teams, the impact of these changes are yet to be felt.

When families and professionals face an absence of early intervention, some feel the only way to get help is to secure support through an education, health and care (EHC) plan. Additionally, for those children and young people with an EHC plan, families too often report the need to intervene and advocate to secure provision in line with the plan for their child. This creates inequity in the system. Although the views of children, young people and their families are usually sought, they are not always listened to and acted on sufficiently well, for example when considering young people's views regarding how well their educational needs are being met.

Too many children and young people do not receive the right help until they are close to crisis point. This is hampered by the lack of cohesive communication systems between services across the partnership, which inhibits joined-up working. Poor information-sharing means that important knowledge of children, young people and their families is not connected across services efficiently and effectively.

In schools, staff are not always well supported to understand and meet the different needs of children and young people with SEND. Leaders know there is a lack of appropriate specialist settings and alternative provision (AP). This means that some children and young people are not able to get the right help quickly enough. At times, this contributes to the breakdown of placements, and leads to children and young people spending too much time out of school. Leaders recognise this and are planning a new

strategy to address these concerns.

Where children and young people receive support within specialist statutory teams, for example the Children's Disability Team, they receive timely assessment and appropriate advice to meet their needs. Here, practitioners effectively assess, review and support children and young people to achieve positive outcomes and experiences. For these children and young people, their transitions are well organised.

Children and young people who can access the right support and setting have their needs understood and met. This sets them up well for their future. For others, lengthy delays in finding the right setting to meet their needs means too many children and young people miss out on important learning and help for an extended time.

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

- Recently appointed area leaders recognise the significant weaknesses of the current system and acknowledge the wide-ranging concerns found during the inspection.
- All agencies involved with looked after children with SEND have a sharp focus on working together to help them to achieve ambitious outcomes. This leads to effective monitoring and multi-agency work across the partnership for children living out of area. Their health, education and social care needs are prioritised. Consequently, their needs are better met and professionals work in partnership with parents and carers. Children are frequently seen by staff, including social workers, and their safety is prioritised.
- Early years practitioners get useful training and advice from the Early Years SEN Inclusion Team. They use the Early Years SEND toolkit to produce 'support and outcomes plans' that outline children's needs clearly. These plans guide practitioners to ensure that children work towards personalised outcomes one careful step at a time. This helps to prepare them for their next steps, if these are known and agreed.
- Where there is strong practitioner knowledge and expertise, children and young people benefit from cohesive, proactive planning for their needs. For example, families accessing the early help service benefit from plans that describe their needs well. The Learning Disabilities Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services team provides welcomed support and useful strategies to families and practitioners.
- The Oxfordshire Parent Carer Forum are committed to working with the local area partnership. They are well connected with training and workforce development initiatives and recently led on a well-received 'Moving into Adulthood' event alongside the partnership. Oxfordshire SENDIASS (SEND information advice and support service) is held in high regard by parents, carers and professionals. When they are able to access this, families receive helpful advice and training.
- Local area leaders acknowledge the lengthy waiting times for the neurodevelopmental conditions pathway. Children, young people and their families

are now being offered support while they are waiting for an appointment. Treatment and support are therefore moving towards a needs-led rather than diagnosis-led pathway.

- Many young people aged 18 to 25 who are known to adult social care receive effective assessment and intervention to meet their needs. Planning for transition is coordinated and avoids delays in meeting the needs of these young people into adulthood. This group receives professional support to participate in decision-making about their futures. Where professionals in further education settings know young people well, they help to support smooth transitions into young people's next steps.

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

- Oxfordshire local area partnership has been characterised by frequent changes and interim arrangements in important roles within the SEND system. There is a disconnect between strategic thinking and operational practice which has contributed to a widespread lack of confidence in area leadership. This has negatively impacted the partnership's ability to undertake transformation and make sustainable change.
- Parent and carer confidence in the local area partnership to meet their children's needs is low. Around 2,000 parents and carers took time to share their views with inspectors. A tangible sense of helplessness runs through their descriptions of their lived experiences. These were typically about the years spent waiting or struggling to be heard to get support in education, health and care. Leaders openly acknowledge the urgent need for a 'reset' to repair the fractured relationships with parents and carers and other stakeholders.
- Agencies within the local area partnership do not work cohesively to ensure that children and young people get the right help at the right time. Although inspection activities supported multi-agency professionals to come together and understand more about children's and young people's needs, the absence of system-wide processes to support this collaboration on a day-to-day basis inhibits access to education, health and multi-agency services.
- The sufficiency of specialist provision is a significant area of concern. Too many children and young people are unable to access the education provision they need. Some wait for years. Despite their commitment to inclusion, some school leaders are unable to meet pupils' increasingly varied needs. This is due to a lack of suitable advice, guidance and support from specialists. Consequently, many school leaders and staff feel overwhelmed because they cannot support children and young people as well as they aspire to.
- Over time there has been little strategic oversight of AP. Area leaders do not know registered or unregistered providers well and relationships with commissioned providers have been notably weak. Area leaders, school leaders and AP leaders all have concerns about the effectiveness of the current system. Commissioning arrangements are unhelpful, and providers are concerned about delays in decision-making, including about transition arrangements.

- Many schools prioritise transition work. However, when there are delays to decision-making and naming suitable placements, this work is undone. Poor communication exacerbates this, adding to the feeling of helplessness expressed by many professionals, parents and carers. These delays impact planning and preparation for next steps.
- The timeliness of EHC plans has recently improved from the published 4% which are completed within the 20-week statutory time frame. EHC plans considered during the inspection rely heavily on education input. There is little inclusion of the contribution from health or social care. Internal quality assurance reviews are thorough and identify precisely where improvement is required. However, there has been no sharing of learning from this work. Therefore, this has not contributed to improving the quality of EHC plans. Frequently, EHC plans do not describe the child or young person accurately enough to ensure that their needs are met effectively, particularly at the point of transition.
- Co-production (a way of working where children, families and those that provide the services work together to create a decision or a service that works for them all) is undervalued across the partnership. Evidence indicates there is late-stage consultation rather than true co-production from the outset. Children’s and young people’s voices are not well heard or sought at the earliest opportunity. Parents and carers report communication both within and across the local area partnership as a significant challenge. They state that ‘parents are the last to know’, for example, if there are changes in professionals involved with the family.
- Children and young people with a high risk of admission for mental health concerns and/or placement breakdown are considered on the dynamic support register. All cases reviewed during the inspection demonstrated a lack of a multi-agency approach to meeting needs effectively.
- Commissioning does not always underpin the service provision needed in Oxfordshire. There is a lack of clarity in the planning and commissioning of services to meet the needs of children and young people. This leads to education and health services being unable to balance capacity and manifests in long waiting times for children and young people.
- Many service reviews and new projects are started. It is unclear if or when these are completed, or what the tangible outcomes are. As a result, parents and carers have lost faith in the area’s ability to deliver on promises that have been made for impactful positive change. Leaders continue to work in a context where they are endeavouring to establish stability in key roles in the SEND system.

### Areas for priority action

Responsible body	Areas for priority action
Oxfordshire County Council and NHS Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, and Berkshire West ICB	Leaders in the local authority, ICB and education, health and care providers should urgently prioritise systems to gather the views of children and young people with SEND effectively. Leaders should use these views to inform their strategic planning for, and evaluation of,

	SEND services that improve the outcomes and experiences of children and young people with SEND and their families.
Oxfordshire County Council and NHS Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, and Berkshire West ICB	Leaders in the local authority, ICB and education, health and care providers should develop communication systems across the partnership to improve the efficiency and quality of their information-gathering processes to ensure that children's and young people's needs are understood and met effectively through coordinated approaches.
Oxfordshire County Council and NHS Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, and Berkshire West ICB	Leaders across the partnership should establish rigorous processes to help ensure the improved timeliness and quality assurance of EHC plans. Leaders should use this learning to improve the quality of new and existing EHC plans.
Oxfordshire County Council and NHS Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, and Berkshire West ICB	Leaders across education, health and care should improve the commissioning of services to ensure that children, young people and their families receive sufficient support to better meet their needs and improve parental confidence in the SEND system.
Oxfordshire County Council and NHS Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, and Berkshire West ICB	Leaders, including education, health and care providers, should identify the steps that they will take to collectively monitor and measure the impact of their strategy and actions. These plans should be co-produced with and communicated clearly to children, young people and their families so that their experiences and outcomes improve.

## Areas for improvement

Areas for improvement
The local area partnership should evaluate the quality and impact of services and joint working more effectively in order to inform improvements that lead to better outcomes and experiences for children and young people with SEND.
Leaders should improve their strategic approach to transition planning at all ages so that children and young people receive the right help and support they need to lead successful lives.
Leaders must continue to develop their oversight, strategy and commissioning arrangements of suitable alternative provision so that there is sufficient suitable provision that meets the needs of children and young people with SEND.
Leaders across the partnership should continue to address the long waiting times for children and young people requesting support from health services. The local area partnership should ensure that support is in place from health services for children and young people who are awaiting assessments.

## Local area partnership details

Local Authority	Integrated Care Board
Oxfordshire County Council	NHS Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, and Berkshire West
Anne Coyle, Director of Children's Services	Nick Broughton, Chief Executive Officer
<a href="http://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk">www.oxfordshire.gov.uk</a>	<a href="http://www.bucksoxonberksw.icb.nhs.uk">www.bucksoxonberksw.icb.nhs.uk</a>
County Hall New Road Oxford OX1 1ND	Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Berkshire West ICB Sandford Gate Sandy Lane West Oxford OX4 6LB

## 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 of His Majesty's Inspectors and an Ofsted Inspector from education and social care; a lead Children's Services Inspector from Care Quality Commission (CQC); and another Children's Services Inspector from the CQC.

## Inspection team

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