

Area SEND inspection of Halton Local Area Partnership

Inspection dates: 20 to 24 November 2023

Date of previous inspection: 27 to 31 March 2017

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 three years.

As a result of this inspection, His Majesty's Chief Inspector 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

Halton Borough Council and NHS Cheshire and Merseyside Integrated Care Board (ICB) are jointly responsible for the planning and commissioning of services for children and young people with SEND in Halton.

There have been significant changes to the senior leadership of Halton's SEND services since the previous inspection. These include the appointment of a new chief executive officer (CEO), several interim directors of children's services, a newly appointed operational director for education, inclusion, and provision, and a new head of service for SEND. A permanent director of children's services started in October 2023.

The commissioning of health services changed across England in 2022. On 1 July 2022, NHS Cheshire and Merseyside ICB became responsible for the commissioning of health services in Halton.

The local authority has a core provider of alternative provision (AP) for children or young people who have been, or are at risk of being, permanently excluded. The local authority does not commission any other AP.

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

Too many children and young people with SEND in Halton wait an unacceptable time to have their needs accurately identified and assessed. For example, children and young people wait too long to access a neurodevelopmental assessment. Most children and young people wait more than 18 months. This means that for some children and young people, their needs escalate to crisis point. While there are some support services available while they wait, too few children, young people and families benefit from these. Families experience ineffective communication while waiting. This causes significant frustration and results in a lack of trust in the system.

Some children and young people of all ages, including those moving from the early years to primary school, and from secondary education to further education, transition without having their needs identified effectively. One in five children do not receive their two-year developmental check. As a result, there is a missed opportunity to identify children's emerging SEND.

Too many children and young people do not receive the right help at the right time. While some services, such as the early help team, integrated physiotherapy and occupational therapy and the specialist teaching teams, provide effective and valued support, there is a lack of capacity across the partnership. Many practitioners work in isolation. This leads to an ineffective and inefficient coordination of support for children and young people with SEND from birth to 25.

Parents, carers, and professionals describe how the 'tell it once approach' is not established in Halton. This leads to duplication of work and delays for children and young people across health, social care, and education teams. Furthermore, it significantly impacts on parents' and carers' trust in the system, as they must retell their stories repeatedly.

Children and young people wait too long to be assessed for an education, health and care (EHC) plan. There are too many barriers in place, further hampered by significant confusion about how to request an EHC plan. Some parents, carers and professionals reported that the partnership requires them to provide two cycles of 'assess, plan, do, review', and educational psychology involvement, before an EHC plan needs assessment can be requested. This approach means that it takes too long to start the process.

The planning to meet some children and young people's needs relies too heavily on one or two supportive professionals, or their parents and carers driving the process. There are limited useful systems around the child or young person to promote successful planning to meet their education, social care and health needs effectively.

Information gathering and sharing between partners is poor. Children's and young people's needs are not understood and met swiftly and effectively through well-coordinated approaches. Consequently, many children and young people with SEND receive an experience that is not as joined up across health, education, and social care

as it should be. There are significant delays in children's plans being issued, often due to capacity within service. Too much is left to chance.

Children and young people with SEND educated in supportive settings with experienced staff and sufficient capacity benefit from the settings' determination. This is despite the local partnership's weak systems.

What is the area partnership doing that is effective?

- Leaders are committed to listening to children and young people, parents and carers. The parent carer forum is a respected and valued strategic partner. A new coproduction strategy has been co-created. However, there is more work to do to embed coproduction with children, young people, parents and carers across the SEND system at all levels.
- Leaders gather and use the views of children and young people to shape services. For example, the parent carer forum heard the voices of disabled children in mainstream schools. Consequently, the partnership established a twice-monthly youth club, which is well attended.
- The school nursing service in Halton is highly valued by many stakeholders. School nurses build positive relationships with, and are easily accessible to, children and young people with SEND aged five to 19. They provide targeted early intervention and advice to both individuals and groups of children and young people. Education leaders appreciate the effective staff training provided by the service.
- Preparation for adulthood processes are positive for some children and young people with SEND, including care leavers. Disabled children and young people benefit from the support of the transition team. Children and young people with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) have a well-supported transition to the adult ADHD service. These teams work collaboratively with other services, such as the educational psychology service and youth justice service to prepare children and young people for the future.
- Older children and young people with SEND access targeted support from the 14 to 19 Team. This team provides impartial advice and guidance to help young people make choices around future learning and careers that are available in the local area. The service is appreciated by parents, carers and education professionals and supports positive preparation for adulthood outcomes across Halton.
- Practitioners in Halton are person-centred and promote a flexible approach to working with children, young people, and their families. Practitioners use innovative and creative ways to capture the voices of children and young people accurately. For example, in care plans and case recording.

- Children and young people with SEND are typically visible and valued in Halton. Clubs and activities support children and young people with SEND to develop their interests and, in some cases, gain further qualifications. Children feel welcomed and supported to access a range of community-based activities.
- The play library helps parents to try different sensory toys to see if these will support their children's needs. The recruitment and training of personal assistants within early help further support children and young people's integration into society.
- Children and young people placed in local authority-commissioned AP receive suitable oversight. This helps to ensure that they are safe and have their needs met effectively in these placements.

What does the area partnership need to do better?

- While partnership leaders are ambitious for children and young people with SEND, there is significant work to do for positive impact to be felt. Leadership instability has impacted negatively on the pace and traction of SEND improvement in Halton. While the newly established leadership team has identified key areas of development, strategic planning in many areas is underdeveloped.
- Leaders have been too slow to respond to the rising numbers and increasing complexity of children and young people's needs across Halton. There is no clear recovery plan in place. Many children and young people are not having their needs met in a timely and appropriate way. For example, a lack of effective commissioning means that some children do not have the correct specialist seating. This impacts on every area of their life.
- Partnership leaders do not work together effectively to jointly commission services. There is no joint commissioning strategy. Despite there being multiple sources of information, leaders are not using these effectively to make commissioning decisions. As a result, services and settings are developing isolated practices to meet needs. Additionally, for some children and young people accessing the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service, there is no equivalent adult service. This results in gaps in treatment.
- The recently commissioned speech and language therapy service has not been mobilised effectively. This has led to further delay and uncertainty for children and young people and their families. Leaders have an unclear understanding of the number of children and young people currently waiting. Moreover, there has been insufficient consideration of the impact of recent changes to the workforce on children and young people with SEND.
- The local area partnership's strategy for AP is in its infancy. Despite leaders' attempts to communicate the strategy's aims and objectives, there is confusion

about the desired impact and next steps. The partnership has a limited understanding of AP in the area. This is partly due to the vast majority of AP being commissioned by schools. However, the local area partnership has not made sufficient inroads to understanding the scale and nature of AP in Halton. This means that the partnership is unable to accurately evaluate and respond to gaps and opportunities in AP for children and young people with SEND. School leaders are keen to broaden the AP offer, but insecure commissioning arrangements continue to delay the strategy.

- The scrutiny and challenge of the SEND system in Halton is ineffective at many levels of governance. While there is a new SEND governance board, the influence of this is currently limited and is not impacting positively on children and young people with SEND and their families in Halton.
- While newly written EHC plans are showing early signs of improvement, and leaders know what a good EHC plan looks like, a considerable number of EHC plans remain variable in quality and effectiveness. Quality assurance is hampered as many health professionals do not receive a copy of the draft or final plan. While some professional advice is effective and useful, too much advice is not as useful, nor as specific, as it should be. This includes advice from social care professionals and advice created as part of group consultation with educational psychologists and specialist teaching teams.
- There is inconsistency in the expertise and understanding of education, health and social care practitioners who provide advice for the EHC process, due to variability in training. Generic outcomes and strategies in some professional advice hinders the SEND team's ability to create an EHC plan that identifies and meets the needs of the child or young person effectively.

Areas for priority action

Responsible body	Areas for priority action
Halton Borough Council and NHS Cheshire and Merseyside Integrated Care Board (ICB)	Leaders at Halton local authority and the NHS Cheshire and Merseyside ICB should cooperate at pace to improve the shared strategic oversight, governance, support and challenge to drive improvements to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND in Halton.
Halton Borough Council and NHS Cheshire and Merseyside Integrated Care Board (ICB)	Leaders in the local authority, ICB and education, health and social care providers should improve the efficiency and quality of their information gathering and sharing processes to ensure that children's and young people's needs are understood accurately and met more swiftly and effectively through coordinated approaches.
Halton Borough Council and NHS Cheshire and	Leaders across education, health and social care should improve the joint commissioning of services to ensure

Merseyside Integrated Care Board (ICB)	that children, young people and their families receive sufficient support to have their needs met effectively.
Halton Borough Council and NHS Cheshire and Merseyside Integrated Care Board (ICB)	Leaders across education, health and social care should urgently improve the early identification of needs and access to specialist health pathways, including the neurodevelopmental assessment pathway and speech and language therapy and the support available, while children and young people wait.
Halton Borough Council and NHS Cheshire and Merseyside Integrated Care Board (ICB)	Leaders across education, health and social care should improve the timeliness of new EHC plans and updates to EHC plans following the annual review process, so that, if appropriate, children and young people receive an effective EHC plan within statutory timescales.

Areas for improvement

Areas for improvement
Leaders should improve the quality of assessment, advice and planning across education, health and social care so that children and young people's needs are better understood and met swiftly and effectively through coordinated approaches.
Leaders across the partnership should strengthen processes for the quality assurance of EHC plans and use these to improve the quality of new and existing EHC plans.
Leaders should ensure that communication with stakeholders, including parents, carers, children and young people, is enhanced. This includes the communication about how leaders plan to develop systems and processes. This should focus on improving parents' and carers' trust in the system. Communication between teams and services should be improved to better identify and meet children and young people's needs.
Leaders should improve the pace and traction of the AP strategy to ensure that it impacts positively on children and young people with SEND.

Local area partnership details

Local Authority	Integrated Care Board
Halton Borough Council	NHS Cheshire and Merseyside Integrated Care Board (ICB)
Zoe Fearon, Director of Children's Services	Graham Urwin, CEO
www3.halton.gov.uk	www.cheshireandmerseyside.nhs.uk
Municipal Building, Kingsway, Widnes WA8 7QF	NHS Cheshire and Merseyside, No 1 Lakeside, 920 Centre Park, Warrington WA1 1QY

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 an HMI from social care and Ofsted Inspector from Education, a lead Children's Services Inspector and a team Children's Services Inspector from the Care Quality Commission (CQC).

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