

Area SEND inspection of North Northamptonshire Local Area Partnership

Inspection dates: 22 to 26 January 2024

Date of previous inspection: Not previously inspected

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

North Northamptonshire Council, NHS Northamptonshire Integrated Care Board and Northamptonshire Children's Trust are responsible for planning and commissioning services to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND in North Northamptonshire, as part of the Local Area Partnership.

North Northamptonshire Council was created in April 2021. It is a relatively new local authority, which has experienced significant and recent changes to its leadership. These include the appointment of an interim director for children's services in October 2023 and an interim head of SEND in July 2023. There is a programme of ongoing recruitment to manager and team leader posts, which are currently filled by interim staff.

The commissioning of health services changed across England in 2022. On 1 July 2022, the responsibility for health services in North Northamptonshire passed from the NHS Northamptonshire Clinical Commissioning Group to NHS Northamptonshire Integrated Care Board.

The North Northamptonshire local area partnership commissions a range of alternative provision (AP). AP provides education for children or young people, including those who cannot attend school due to social, emotional and mental health and medical needs, or for those who have been or are at risk of being permanently excluded from school.

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

Not enough is known about children and young people with SEND in North Northamptonshire. This is because they do not always have their needs accurately identified and assessed right from the start. Services are disjointed across education, health and social care. Poor information-sharing means that important knowledge of children, young people and their families is not connected across services efficiently and effectively. Professionals do not always work effectively together. As a result, some children and young people wait too long to get the help they need. Waiting times for health services such as speech and language therapy, mental health services and access to a paediatrician are too long. Leaders have not acted effectively in order to ensure that appropriate support is available to mitigate the negative impact of these waiting times. This means some children's and young people's difficulties become greater while they wait to get the right support. This leads to many families finding themselves in crisis. At times, this contributes to the breakdown of school placements and leads to children and young people with SEND spending too much time out of school. Leaders recognise this and are planning a new strategy to address these concerns.

Parent and carer voices, as well as the views of children and young people, have been heard much more effectively in recent times. The partnership has recently adopted a co-production charter, but this work is not yet embedded. Currently, there is not a coherent partnership approach to ensure that families are listened to. Too many parents feel that they have to resort to formal routes to try to secure suitable provision for their children. This results in frustrations and additional pressures on families.

While the timeliness of the completion of education, health and care (EHC) plans has improved recently, the quality of too many plans are poor. Some plans are finalised without contributions from health or social care professionals. In some cases, this has led to inaccurate identification of children's needs and inappropriate support being allocated to them. Too many parents are frustrated about the accuracy of EHC plans which do not reflect the current needs of their children. Leaders have recognised the need to improve these plans but have not acted quickly to address the issues. The actions they have taken are yet to have an impact. Actions and amendments agreed in review meetings are not updated in EHC plans. This has a particularly negative impact on children and young people who are transitioning to their next steps.

Through the early help offer, children and young people with SEND are able to access a range of services which support their inclusion in their communities. Where children and young people receive specialist support within, for example, the Children's Disability Team, they receive timely assessment and appropriate advice to meet their needs.

Children and young people with SEND who access a specialist school setting often receive the right help and, as a result, thrive in their placement. Those who are placed in AP typically have their needs met well. A significant number of these children and young people should have had their needs identified, assessed and met at an earlier stage. This early identification could have prevented the need for AP. Leaders maintain effective

oversight of these placements to help to ensure that they are suitable and safe. There are not enough places available to meet the growing demand for these settings, so some pupils are left without suitable provision for a considerable period of time.

Local area leaders have started to address the issue of a lack of specialist places through resourced bases in mainstream schools and commissioning early help outreach provision to mainstream schools from special schools. This outreach is starting to have a positive impact for some children. However, children and young people with SEND do not get the same level of support from all providers. It depends on individual schools as to how consistently the school applies the graduated response. A significant number of pupils who have been suspended or excluded are pupils with SEND. Absence rates for pupils with SEND in mainstream schools is above the national rate. There is not an agreed and shared understanding of, or approach to, how and when to help children and young people with SEND. This means that the success of the support children and young people receive is not guaranteed across North Northamptonshire.

What is the area partnership doing that is effective?

- Many of the local area's strategic and planning documents are currently in draft form. Leaders recognise that these planned improvements have the potential to improve the support for children and young people with SEND. Further new initiatives are due to start this year.
- A common feature of planning in some education, health and care services across the area is an improved focus on the voice of the child. The local area partnership worked closely with the Parent Carer Forum to gather the views of families and co-produce and develop the recent local area SEND strategy.
- Co-production with parents for a 'digital front door' to children's services, which will encompass the local offer, 'Family Information Service' and 'Start for Life', is ongoing. There has been some positive initial feedback from parents about this improved access to information and support.
- There are some emerging 'green shoots' of more effective early help and support to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND. The 'early help assessment and team around the family' model is well embedded with education, health, and social care early help professionals taking a lead to coordinate an assessment of and plan for the child. Children and young people with SEND benefit from other early help services that provide support in their home and in the community.
- Early years settings and schools value the support and advice they are given by the specialist school team. Teams within the local authority are working more effectively together and with mainstream schools to improve support for children and young people with SEND, and to reduce the frequency of suspensions and exclusions.
- Where children and young people have particularly complex needs, professionals across the partnership work closely together to ensure that there is a coordinated approach to the support they provide.

- Children and young people with SEND who are in special school settings benefit from a well-thought-of specialist school nursing team, whose members provide both direct support and care, as well as training for other professionals.
- Across the local area, community support groups help young people aged 19 to 25 who are neurodiverse to engage in community activities.
- A strong emotional and well-being offer meets the needs of children and young people with SEND across the local area who need support with their mental health. This includes the work that is done by mental health support teams, as well as 'The REACH' collaborative.
- Children with sensory impairment are well supported. The team works effectively to prepare children for their next steps. Creative work with children and families promotes good outcomes.
- The local partnership commissioned a nationally recognised programme to analyse speech, language and communication needs. This has provided useful recommendations for improvement and future transformation.

What does the area partnership need to do better?

- Leaders have not ensured that there is a clear and cohesive strategic direction for the local partnership. There is not yet a comprehensive understanding of what good-quality partnership working looks like in North Northamptonshire. Although there is an understanding of where improvements are needed in individual agencies, a shared understanding of this across all partners in the system has not yet been achieved in a way that would lead to effective improvement.
- Leaders have not ensured that the recently agreed SEND strategy includes effective underpinning plans which clearly demonstrate how improvements are to be made in a timely manner for key areas such as transitions, waiting times for health services, support available while waiting, accurate identification of children's needs and the quality of EHC plans. None of these key areas have been thought about carefully enough to ensure that timely and sustained improvement can be made.
- Local area leaders do not work together effectively in order to meet their statutory requirements for joint commissioning fully. There is no strategy in place that outlines a shared understanding and agreed approach to joint commissioning. The impact of this lack of strategic oversight in the provision and quality of some services has resulted in children and young people with SEND not having their needs met as well as they should.
- Those responsible for governance have not ensured that there is a shared and effective oversight of the activities the partners undertake to fulfil their responsibilities. The SEND accountability board does not currently fulfil this role. Leaders are currently unable to challenge themselves and each other effectively in order to improve experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND. This is because the information that is currently available to all partners limits their ability to hold each other accountable.

- Local area leaders have not jointly or accurately identified, assessed and provided for the needs of children and young people with SEND. The lack of involvement of professionals from all agencies in the creation and review of EHC plans has led to inaccurate plans being issued. Furthermore, existing plans have remained out of date for a considerable number of years. This has caused frustration for parents and extra work for professionals who are trying to adapt plans that are not fit for purpose.
- There has been a failure to address excessive waiting times for access to services, such as speech and language therapy, mental health services, and all aspects of the neurodevelopmental pathway. This negatively impacts on the lives of children and young people with SEND. There has not been sufficient support for families across most services while they wait for an assessment or support. Some children's needs have escalated due to these needs not being met for a considerable amount of time.
- There is evidence that the dynamic support register is used in a way that reduces the risk of avoidable admissions to hospital. However, leaders have recognised that this needs to be further strengthened, as, currently, the register does not always capture all vulnerable groups, such as those who do not yet have a formal diagnosis of autism or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.
- Specialist equipment is not always available to meet individual needs. This has negatively affected the lived experience of children and young people with SEND and their families through extended waiting times or the right equipment just not being available at all.
- Early years settings have not benefited from coordinated support from the local partnership in order to help them identify children's needs early on. Delays in assessments and complicated arrangements to access funding for support mean that the required support is often not in place quickly enough to benefit children before they move into their next setting. This can lead to some children missing out on specialist settings and some transitions to mainstream school failing because the appropriate support is not in place in time.
- Local area leaders have not yet developed a strategic approach to commissioning sufficient quality alternative provision to ensure that these placements adequately meet the needs of children and young people with SEND. As a result, some children and young people are missing out on full-time education.
- Local area leaders have identified preparation for adulthood as an area for further development across the partnership and have developed plans to address this. However, at present, support and help for key transitions, particularly at 16 years old, either comes too late, or in many cases, not at all. Inaccurate EHC plans do not support pupils effectively to achieve strong outcomes or access appropriate placements. Support arrangements in schools do not always continue with the young person to their next setting. This results in education professionals having to start a new application process to source the support needed. The next steps for children and young people with SEND across health services are considered much too close to them becoming an adult. This results in delays to them being able to access appropriate adult services to meet their needs.

Areas for priority action

Responsible body	Areas for priority action
North Northamptonshire Council, NHS Northamptonshire Integrated Care Board and Northamptonshire Children's Trust	Leaders across the partnership need to ensure that there is a clear and cohesive strategic direction for the local partnership. This includes a secure understanding of what good-quality partnership working looks like. Leaders need to ensure that the agreed strategy includes effective underpinning plans which clearly demonstrate how improvements will be made in a timely manner for key areas such as transitions, waiting times in health and support available while waiting, and the accurate identification of children's and young people's needs.
North Northamptonshire Council, NHS Northamptonshire Integrated Care Board and Northamptonshire Children's Trust	Leaders across the partnership need to ensure that there is a shared understanding and agreed approach to joint commissioning to avoid missing opportunities to commission services in a way that meets the needs and improves the lived experience of children and young people with SEND and their families.
North Northamptonshire Council, NHS Northamptonshire Integrated Care Board and Northamptonshire Children's Trust	Leaders across the partnership must put in place the appropriate governance arrangements to deliver and monitor their SEND and AP strategy across the wider partnership. This includes strengthening the information that is currently available to all partners and using this effectively in order to hold each other accountable.
North Northamptonshire Council, NHS Northamptonshire Integrated Care Board and Northamptonshire Children's Trust	Leaders across the partnership need to jointly and accurately identify, assess and provide for the needs of children and young people with SEND. This includes multi-agency assessment of needs, timely issuing of high quality EHC plans and a holistic oversight of these plans through annual reviews to ensure that they are kept up to date.

Areas for improvement

Areas for improvement
Leaders across the partnership should continue to address the long waiting times for children and young people with SEND requesting support from health services. The local area partnership should ensure that support is in place for children and young people with SEND waiting for assessments and services.
Leaders across the partnership need to improve the access to specialist equipment in a more timely manner for children and young people with SEND who need it.

Leaders across the partnership need to coordinate their approach to supporting children with SEND in the early years. They need to ensure that children's needs are assessed as early as possible and that processes for accessing support are efficient and timely to ensure that children with SEND are well supported in their setting and through their transition to their next placement.

Leaders from the local authority need to strengthen the relationships they have developed with mainstream schools and continue to work with them with support, as appropriate from the wider partnership, to ensure that attendance for children and young people with SEND improves and rates of suspensions and exclusion decrease.

Leaders from the local authority need to develop a strategic approach to commissioning sufficient quality alternative provision and accelerate initial discussions with other local areas to ensure that children and young people with SEND who need these placements are not left without suitable education.

Leaders across the partnership need to improve the timeliness of support and guidance for children and young people with SEND and their families when they are transitioning to different education settings, to their next steps after education and/or into adult services. This support should be early enough for children and young people with SEND to make fully informed decisions about their next steps and the support they need to ensure that they are well prepared for adult life.

Local area partnership details

Local Authority	Integrated Care Board
North Northamptonshire	NHS Northamptonshire Integrated Care Board
David Watts, Director of Children's Services	Toby Sanders, Chief Executive Officer
www.northnorthants.gov.uk	www.icnorthamptonshire.org.uk
The Corby Cube, George Street, Parklands Gateway, Corby, Northamptonshire NN17 1QG	Haylock House, Kettering Parkway, Venture Park, Kettering, Northamptonshire NN15 6EY

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 (HMIs) from Ofsted, with a team of inspectors, including: two of HMIs 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.

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