

Area SEND inspection of Bedford Borough Local Area Partnership

Inspection dates: 18 to 22 November 2024

Dates of previous inspection: The previous full inspection was on 19 March 2018. There was a subsequent revisit on 24 March 2020.

Inspection outcome

The local area partnership's special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) arrangements typically lead to positive experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND. The local area partnership is taking action where improvements are needed.

The next full area SEND inspection will be within approximately five years.

Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) ask that the local area partnership updates and publishes its strategic plan based on the recommendations set out in this report.

Information about the local area partnership

Bedford Borough Council and the NHS Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes Integrated Care Board (ICB) are responsible for planning and commissioning services to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND in Bedford Borough, as part of the Bedford Borough local area partnership. The Bedford Borough partnership oversees the commissioning of local education, social care and health provision for children and young people with SEND.

The director for children's services (DCS) has been appointed since the previous inspection.

The commissioning of health services changed across England in 2022. On 1 July 2022, the responsibility for health services in Bedford Borough passed from the NHS Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes Clinical Commissioning Groups to the NHS Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes ICB.

The partnership commissions a range of alternative provision (AP). This includes provision for children or young people who may be at risk of being or have been permanently excluded.

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

Children in Bedford Borough have their voices heard effectively. The parent and carers' forum (PCF) is represented well as part of the partnership. This culture of co-working between the partnership and children and families enables them to understand and shape the services they require. There are few complaints or appeals. A small number of families have fewer positive experiences. Where this happens, the engagement of the partnership with families and children and young people, to seek a resolution, is strong.

Mostly, the needs of children and young people with SEND are identified early and accurately across education, health and social care. For example, assessments from the disabled children's service are timely and thorough. Waiting times in many health services have decreased, which aids the prompt identification of SEND. Education, health and care (EHC) plans are completed with excellent timeliness. This means children and young people with SEND do not normally experience frustrating delays before the area identifies and puts plans in place to meet their needs. Children on the neurodevelopmental assessment pathways wait too long for assessment, but the partnership is effective in supporting them during the process. This is not dependent on a diagnosis. For instance, while waiting, children and young people find direction and encouragement through mentoring programmes or through online information, support and gaming groups.

In general, children and young people get strong support. They usually experience a team of expert and committed professionals working in a joined-up way to help them. Health services, such as speech and language therapy, are responsive and effective. Academic outcomes are lower than they could be, but in a host of other ways children and young people with SEND are doing well. When they face challenges, their needs are met, and they get help to overcome these. In schools, pupils with SEND mostly get appropriate adaptations from well-trained staff. While this is so, a few children and young people with SEND have not had their needs identified and met successfully. Sometimes, this has resulted in crisis. Many have been suspended or excluded from school when this might have been avoided. The partnership knows this and has acted urgently to address it. There is now more suitable AP to assist those at risk of exclusion. Exclusions recently have fallen.

Children and young people receive effective support at transitions. Their needs are met at the right time by the early help team. Young people with SEND get a lot of well-considered guidance as they prepare for adulthood. Programmes such as work placements, job coaching and supported internships build their employability skills. As a result, the proportion of children and young people with SEND who are not in education, employment or training is very low.

Across the area, children and young people with SEND are valued within their communities. Well-attended activities such as those arranged via the 'Summer of SEND' make them feel integrated. An 'Inclusive Park' was initiated by leaders listening to the voice of children and young people with SEND. This is one example of effective co-working with children and young people with SEND from the ground up. Some young people and families feel that they do not have enough local activities.

What is the area partnership doing that is effective?

- The partnership is ambitious for children and young people with SEND to be successful. It knows that some outcomes have not been as strong as they could be, such as academic outcomes. However, the area has developed its strategy and governance so that it sustains impact over time. Weaker aspects are improving.
- Leaders know what works well and what could be better. A strong part of this is the clear input from the PCF, such as the PCF's contribution to the recent 'joint strategic needs assessment'. This enables partnership leaders to commission the right services for the area. The partnership has upskilled practitioners, for example support for SEND in occupational therapy. This results in effective health services.
- There is an established culture of multi-agency working. For example, the Multi-Agency Panel thinks creatively about how services can work together to solve problems. Teams 'around the child' go above and beyond. This provides well-coordinated and persistent help for children and young people with SEND with multiple needs and vulnerabilities. Well-designed systems for sharing information across services lead to a holistic provision of healthcare for children. For instance, wheelchair services can access shared health records. This informs planning for any necessary equipment changes. Therefore, most children who require specialist mobility equipment in Bedford Borough are able to access the right mobility support at the right time.
- The stability of the partnership's workforce has given the capacity to build lasting impact. This is seen in areas such as EHC plan timeliness. This stability aids strong and well-developed relationships with services across the area. For example, the mental health and educational psychology teams work seamlessly with the partnership's SEND team to identify needs precisely.
- In most aspects, the partnership supports schools and early years settings well. They have access to wide-ranging training and guidance. Sometimes, providers experience gaps in local services. The SEND team is responsive and mitigates these well. The 'Team Around the School' pilot streamlines partnership working. This enables provision to be tailored well for pupils with SEND.
- Social care teams provide effective services, for example those for disabled children and young people. The early help team intervenes effectively on behalf of children and young people with SEND and their families well. They receive assessment and bespoke provision at the right time, such as through family hubs.
- The dynamic support register is well established. It has clear processes and services to aid children and young people at times of emerging crisis. This has led to a reduction in hospital admissions for children and young people with SEND with mental health needs.
- Across the area, there are many examples of health professionals meeting needs successfully. Where appropriate, children and young people with SEND receive expert nursing provision. This is whether they are in an education setting or at home. Special school nurses and the universal services offer, including the 0 to 19 team, work

tirelessly so that children and young people with SEND enjoy healthier lives.

- The partnership ensures that children and young people with SEND who are missing out on education benefit from strong support. Those who are 'educated other than at school' receive high-quality provision and wrap-around care. If children and young people struggle to attend, the partnership intervenes extensively and often creatively so children and young people with SEND attend better over time. An example is the early help team providing bespoke daily interventions so that young people are prepared for school. School attendance is typically higher for children and young people with SEND in Bedford Borough than elsewhere.
- Strong joint working means that many young people with SEND enter adulthood with confidence and independence. Social care and early help services start planning for transitions early. They ensure that they consider all areas of children's needs. Transitions for young people with mental health needs are well considered. Local training providers work with the partnership to fill gaps in the market for those not able to access college. This gives young people a gateway to success in adulthood.

What does the area partnership need to do better?

- In response to high exclusions of children and young people with SEND, partnership leaders have reviewed the area's AP offer. They are developing the AP strategy in a collaborative and measured way. This has created buy-in from schools. There is already a reduction in the number of exclusions. However, this is a work in progress. The improvement is not yet apparent in primary schools and not felt by some parents and carers.
- The partnership has limited oversight of how long children and young people are waiting for assessment on the neurodevelopmental pathway. Nor does it have a clear view of how these waiting times are likely to reduce.
- The partnership does not have a tight grip on how well children and young people progress towards their EHC plan outcomes. Consequently, the partnership is less able to adapt its approaches to support children and young people to achieve as well as they could.
- There is more to do to ensure that some staff in schools have the expertise to identify and support children and young people's needs successfully. This particularly applies to identifying and helping pupils with SEND who do not have an EHC plan.
- Results in national educational tests and assessments for children and young people with SEND are lower than national results. The partnership has established a long-term strategy to address this. However, it is too early to evaluate the effect of this.
- There are gaps in a small number of health services. In particular, there is no commissioned service to assess and diagnose learning disabilities. This may hinder those affected from accessing the services they require. Furthermore, although there are hydrotherapy pools available, a lack of staff and limited maintenance of the pools result in them not being accessed by those who need them.

Areas for improvement

| Areas for improvement |
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| The partnership should establish more effective processes to ensure that children and young people's needs are identified quickly and accurately. This is so that unmet needs in schools are addressed earlier and better, and so children and young people with SEND at risk of exclusion are helped more proactively. |
| Some children and young people with SEND wait too long for neurodevelopmental assessment in Bedford Borough. The partnership has a limited oversight of how long these children are waiting. The partnership should improve how it uses information and data to work collaboratively to reduce the delays in neurodevelopmental assessments that some children and young people currently face. |

Local area partnership details

| Local authority | Integrated care board |
|--|--|
| Bedford Borough Council | NHS Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes ICB |
| Harmesh Bhogal, DCS | Felicity Cox, chief executive officer |
| www.bedford.gov.uk | www.bedfordshirelutonandmiltonkeynes.icb.nhs.uk |
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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 Ofsted Inspector from education and one HMI from social care; a lead Children's Services Inspector from the CQC; and another Children's Services Inspector from the CQC.

Inspection team

Ofsted

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