

Area SEND inspection of East Sussex Local Area Partnership

Inspection dates: 18 to 22 November 2024

Dates of previous inspection: 5 to 9 December 2016

Inspection outcome

The local area partnership's arrangements lead to inconsistent experiences and outcomes for children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). The local area partnership must work jointly to make improvements.

The next full area SEND inspection will be within approximately 3 years.

Ofsted and 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

East Sussex County Council and NHS Sussex Integrated Care Board share responsibility as a local area partnership for planning and commissioning services to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND in the area.

Since the previous inspection, NHSE granted the dissolution of the seven Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) in Sussex, and subsequent merger into three CCGs (East Sussex, West Sussex and Brighton & Hove) on 1 April 2020. The NHS Sussex Integrated Care Board was then established on 1 July 2022, taking on the commissioning functions previously carried out by CCGs.

The local area partnership commissions a range of alternative provision (AP) to provide places to children and young people who are unable to attend school, as well as for those who have been permanently excluded.

What is it like to be a child or young person with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) in this area?

Children and young people with SEND in East Sussex have variable experiences. Many families describe the excellent support that they receive from some individual practitioners, but report that the system as a whole can be confusing and difficult to navigate. Leaders have rightly identified the areas that need to improve. However, for many children and young people the impact of these improvements is still emerging.

Early years settings play a crucial role in identifying children with communication and interaction needs. Working with specialist teams commissioned by the local partnership, practitioners in these settings ensure that children's needs are identified quickly so that they receive timely support.

For many families, securing an education, health and care (EHC) plan in East Sussex has not been a positive experience. Inspectors heard from parents and carers who described this process as lengthy and adversarial. Recently, the quality and timeliness of EHC plans have improved. The majority of new plans in East Sussex are finalised within the expected time frame. 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) plays a greater role than before. This means that parents are more involved and children and young people have more say about the support that they should receive. Despite these improvements, delays in the annual review process lead to outdated advice in some existing EHC plans. As a result, some children and young people do not get the support that they need to achieve the best possible outcomes.

Children wait too long for necessary interventions from some services, such as child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). The wait for wheelchairs is also too long. This has a significant negative impact on the well-being and development of some children and young people with SEND. At times, these delays lead to a worsening of their conditions and hinder their ability to participate fully in society. While interim support is available through local charities and community services, this is not currently addressing the level of need. Despite recent improvements, some parents are frustrated about the lack of support and advice available while waiting for services.

Support for the most vulnerable children and young people and their families is rightly prioritised by the local partnership. A multi-agency approach to early help services and family hubs enables families to navigate the system and gain access to the other support that they might need. Those supported by the children with disabilities team benefit from effective oversight. Children and young people on the dynamic support register are closely monitored and receive effective support from a key worker. Equally, groups of schools meet together along with professionals from health and social care to agree early interventions for children and young people at risk of permanent exclusion.

The local partnership recognises that children and young people with SEND have mixed experiences of inclusion in mainstream schools. Although there is more to do in this area, the partnership is committed to making improvements and has made significant strides

forward. For example, it has facilitated groups of schools working together in regional clusters to promote more inclusive approaches.

A lack of specialist provision in some areas, including AP and suitable post-16 options, hinders the progress of some children and young people with SEND. This results in some children and young people attending provision that does not fully meet their needs, impacting their outcomes negatively. The partnership is in the process of addressing this by working with local providers.

What is the area partnership doing that is effective?

- Leaders in East Sussex are ambitious to improve the lived experiences of children and young people with SEND. Leaders have renewed their focus on SEND in the local area. Ambitious plans are focused on securing better outcomes for children and young people with SEND across East Sussex.
- The local partnership is committed to co-production with parents. While the East Sussex Parent Carer Forum is involved in strategic meetings, they would welcome more consistent and meaningful involvement in decision-making. A recent review has led to a new co-production charter, aiming to enhance parental involvement in shaping SEND services.
- The local partnership has focused on developing early interventions and more preventative approaches to meeting children and young people's needs. For example, working closely with groups of schools has started to have an impact on reducing exclusions.
- The SEND information, advice and support service provides important guidance to families. It is highly regarded in the local area by parents who have benefited from the service.
- There are positive examples of multi-agency working where professionals from education, health and social care come together to provide holistic support for children and young people and their families. In such cases, information is shared effectively and ensures that the support provided to children is joined up coherently.
- A higher proportion of children and young people with SEND in East Sussex attend specialist education settings compared with the national average. Those who attend these settings often receive high-quality provision and therapeutic interventions which meet their needs well. A small number of children and young people attend residential special schools, including some outside East Sussex. Careful thought goes into the commissioning of these places. The partnership complete rigorous checks on the suitability of residential provision.
- The local partnership maintains a robust oversight of children who are not in school, including those who are electively home educated or have a package of education other than at school. This includes suitable checks on any commissioned AP.
- The local partnership has increased its provision of short breaks for families. Leaders recognise that the need for this provision remains high, particularly for children and young people who require more specialist medical care. They continue to review this

offer to better reflect local need.

- When families receive support from social care teams or early help, strong multidisciplinary working enables effective interventions that prioritise the needs of children and young people. For example, the needs of children and young people with SEND have been prioritised in the design of family hubs.
- Leaders continue to strengthen their understanding of the needs of children and young people with SEND in the local area. For example, a dashboard for health data has been developed across Sussex localities and is starting to inform decision-making. Education teams make effective use of data on attendance and exclusions to support and challenge schools.

What does the area partnership need to do better?

- The quality of EHC plans is variable. Although more recent plans are of a higher quality, this does not reflect the experience of the majority of families who have been through the process of securing an EHC plan. Sometimes plans contain inconsistent information, particularly in relation to health needs. Over time, it has been common for plans to contain out-of-date information because EHC plans have not been updated promptly following annual reviews. Recent changes to the process have started to address this weakness, for example focusing on annual reviews conducted at times of transition in the first instance.
- Waiting times are excessive for some health services, including for those children awaiting attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or autism assessments and targeted mental health interventions from CAMHS. Some children and young people wait for around three years before they can access targeted mental health interventions. During this time, their needs frequently change and escalate. Although there are some services which provide support to those who are waiting, they do not have the capacity to help the large number of families who are waiting.
- Waiting times for wheelchairs are too long. This is having a profoundly negative impact on the physical and mental well-being of those children and young people affected. This can also prevent them from being involved in their community in a meaningful way. Although there are plans to recommission this service in the future, this will not happen for some time.
- Although the delivery of the Healthy Child Programme in East Sussex is an improving picture, there have been capacity challenges in delivering the service. The partnership recognises that this needs to be an area of ongoing focus to ensure that all children have their needs identified at the earliest opportunity.
- The proportion of children and young people with SEND who are not in education, employment or training when they leave school is too high. The local partnership recognises that opportunities for some children and young people are limited by a lack of suitable post-16 places, particularly for those with social, emotional and/or mental health needs.
- The local partnership recognises that key transitions are particularly important for children and young people with SEND. Pupils, parents and practitioners in East Sussex

told us that these points in time could be challenging, for example when there is not a smooth transition between services or school phases. The local partnership has made recent improvements in this area, which are beginning to have a positive impact.

- Through a 'team around the school' approach, the partnership works with leaders in education settings to focus on issues such as exclusions and attendance. Although this is beginning to have an impact, children and young people with SEND do not achieve consistently positive outcomes.
- The arrangements for the commissioning of AP are currently not meeting the local need for placements. The partnership is in the process of recommissioning AP provision. Support to help pupils make an effective transition back into a permanent mainstream or special provision has been established.

Areas for improvement
<p>The local area partnership should continue to improve the quality of EHC plans, so that there is consistent input across all agencies to better identify the provision that children and young people require to meet their needs. This should include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ improving joint working of practitioners, particularly health, to contribute to EHC plans; and ■ ensuring a more timely and precise annual review process.
<p>The local area partnership should take further action to reduce overall waiting times in relation to neurodevelopmental pathways, CAMHS interventions and the provision of wheelchairs. They should ensure that the support that they provide to families while waiting is well used and beneficial.</p>
<p>The local area partnership should develop and embed its work with education settings on improving inclusion, so that the proportion of children and young people achieving strong outcomes increases.</p>
<p>The local area partnership should continue to work with relevant stakeholders to ensure that there is sufficient and suitable AP and post-16 options for children and young people with SEND.</p>

Local area partnership details

Local authority	Integrated care board
East Sussex County Council	NHS Sussex Integrated Care Board
Carolyn Fair, Director of Children's Services	Adam Doyle, Chief Executive Officer
www.eastsussex.gov.uk	www.sussex.ics.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: two HMI/Ofsted Inspectors from education and social care; a lead Children's Services Inspector from the Care Quality Commission (CQC); and another Children's Services Inspector from CQC.

Inspection team

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