

Area SEND inspection of Darlington Local Area Partnership

Inspection dates: 25 to 29 November 2024

Dates of previous inspection: 24 to 28 January 2022

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 three 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

The commissioning of health services changed across England in 2022. At this time, the responsibility for health services in Darlington passed to the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (ICB). Darlington Borough Council and North East and North Cumbria ICB are jointly responsible for the planning and commissioning of services for children and young people with SEND in Darlington.

Since the previous inspection in January 2022, leadership across the local area partnership has remained stable with some changes to the local governance structure. This includes development of the SEND implementation group and SEND assurance executive committee, overseen by the health and well-being board.

The local area partnership, and schools, commission alternative provision (AP) through a local authority maintained pupil referral unit (PRU). This is for permanently excluded pupils, those pupils identified at risk of permanent exclusion and pupils being reintegrated into education after a period of absence. Children and young people who cannot attend school because of health needs are supported by the home and hospital teaching service. This is managed by the PRU with the support of the local authority.

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

The local area partnership (the partnership) is committed to improving the education, health and social care services across Darlington which benefit children and young people with SEND. However, the impact of the partnership's work on children and young people's lived experience is inconsistent.

Children and young people with SEND have a voice in Darlington. They are valued, visible and included in their communities. The partnership works closely with children and young people with SEND to ensure that their voices are heard. Children and young people make their views known to local leaders. This includes speaking to elected members about the type of activities and facilities that they would like locally. For example, children and young people have been influential in suggesting improvements to the design of local facilities, such as adaptations and improvements to local parks to improve disabled access.

Children, young people and their families are included in decision-making about the individual support plans and types of support that they receive. This includes support that is effective for their next steps in education, employment or training, and to prepare for adulthood or the transition from children's to adult social care. The partnership mostly works proactively with schools and education providers to ensure that children and young people stay in education or training.

There is a growing number of pupils in Darlington with social, emotional and mental health needs who benefit from the additional provision and support provided by AP. The partnership has successfully reviewed and reorganised AP provision. As a result, some of these pupils develop positive school attitudes and demonstrate improved attendance at school.

Most children and young people receive effective support with their school attendance. As a result, children and young people with SEND in Darlington attend school regularly. Many children and young people with SEND are supported effectively to do well at school. For example, the number of children and young people with education, health and care (EHC) plans, who achieve at least a grade 4 in English and mathematics GCSEs, is greater than national averages for England.

The voice of the child, young person and their families is more consistently represented in new EHC plans than older plans. However, advice and recommendations about a child or young person's health, education and social care is not consistently included in EHC plans and/or when annual reviews have been completed. In addition, some children and young people's EHC plans are not consistently linked to their social care plans to ensure continuity of care. This negatively impacts multi-agency planning to provide children and young people with co-ordinated care when needed.

Disabled children's social care needs are mostly identified accurately and assessed in a

timely way. Consequently, most children and young people receive timely and effective support from early help or children's social care. Their voices are clearly incorporated into their social care assessments and this informs children and young people's plans. Children and young people's social care plans are child-centred and identify multi-disciplinary actions to improve the child's lived experience.

Children and young people receive a range of appropriate health support in Darlington. This has been implemented to meet individual children and young people's needs at the earliest opportunity. However, across some health services, for some children, young people and their families, waiting times are too long. For example, some children and young people over five years old experience lengthy waits for a neuro-developmental diagnosis, while others can wait for extended periods of time to access speech and language therapy.

Children and young people are working with the partnership to co-produce a new SEND strategy to improve the support that they receive. This is currently under consultation with the wider community. However, it does not have an accompanying implementation plan. This means that it is unclear how the SEND strategy will be delivered and what the overall impact will be for children, young people and their families.

What is the area partnership doing that is effective?

- The partnership is ambitious for children and young people with SEND. Leaders work closely together to improve local provision. They have shared priorities in a joint-working partnership to improve SEND in Darlington. Most stakeholders, including the Darlington Parent and Carer Forum (PCF), believe that the support for children and young people with SEND is improving.
- The PCF is valued by the partnership. It has a strategic voice and is fully involved in co-production and the development of a range of partnership strategies, for example the emotionally based school avoidance strategy. Similarly, children and young people are involved effectively in co-producing the Darlington SEND strategy.
- The timeliness and quality of children and young people's EHC plans are improving. Children and young people's assessments for EHC plans are mostly completed within statutory timeframes. A new EHC plan format, developed with the PCF, more accurately represents children and young people's lived experience.
- The Designated Clinical Officer (DCO) is well established in the ICB and across SEND systems in Darlington. The role is widely known and understood by professionals across education, health and social care. The DCO provides impactful information and advice for children, young people and their families.
- The Dynamic Support Register (DSR) is well developed and embedded in Darlington. Children and young people receive a clear package of key-worker co-ordinated care that meets their needs well. Some children and young people also benefit in the same way from a pre-DSR. This means that children and young people without a formal diagnosis of autism or learning disability can access care from a multi-disciplinary team of professionals.

- Children, young people and their families receive a comprehensive range of effective support while they are waiting for access to services, such as speech and language therapies and autism assessment. For example, children with complex needs are referred to the sleep service, incontinence teams and 'early bird plus' to develop their family's understanding of best practices to support autism. Family support hubs and the local 'daisy chain' autism support are available for families to access for further support.
- The partnership has implemented well-thought-out strategies to support the mental health and emotional well-being needs of children and young people across Darlington. This includes the mental health support team in schools and early intervention by the 0-19 service, provided by the Darlington 'Growing Healthy Team'. For example, the 0-19 service offers a 'Decider' resilience course to prepare children and young people for secondary school.
- Most education providers describe a generally positive picture of partnership work to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND in Darlington, for example co-ordinated workforce development that includes emotionally based school avoidance training and awareness. As a result, this area of need is better supported and prioritised across services.
- Children and young people who are in care, and have SEND, are successfully prepared for adulthood. Their destination data compares favourably to national averages for England. Schools proactively request the support of the virtual school to deploy partnership inclusion and SEND teams to support them. These teams ensure that children and young people who are in care, and have SEND, are supported well to stay in education, employment or training.
- When disabled children and young people are cared for, away from their families, commissioners seek appropriate assurance about safeguarding them and the quality of their care and education. Carers support children and young people to participate in social and life skill opportunities that enhance their lived experiences.
- Disabled children receiving support from children's social care experience smooth transitions to adult social care. They receive effective multi-agency support from health and education during this transition period. As a result, young people with disabilities are supported to stay safe, and their SEND needs continue to be met.

What does the area partnership need to do better?

- Leaders are improving the effectiveness of data to support their work, such as to gain a clearer picture of the number of children and young people with SEND who are electively home educated. However, this is not consistent across the partnership. Leaders are continuing to develop how they use data to inform strategic planning.
- Children and young people wait too long for some therapy services and a diagnosis for autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. For example, children under five years old often wait for up to 23 months and children and young people over five years old wait up to 42 months. However, children, young people and their families can access support while they are waiting. This includes primary and secondary resource bases that provide help and advice without needing a diagnosis to access

support. In addition, the 0-19 service duty line is available for families to access support.

- There is a lack of a defined process to assess and support children and young people with a learning disability. As a result, it is sometimes difficult for families and professionals to navigate the support available. This means that there is an increased likelihood that children and young people with a learning disability could miss out on important services, such as annual health checks.
- Some children and young people experience delays in the delivery of some health services, for example when navigating access to home equipment. Service specifications, which include funding for local authority occupational health services, do not align across health services. These delays and complicated service specifications can be frustrating for families to navigate.
- The partnership has developed clear criteria for the identification of need with 'SEND ranges' documents. However, professionals' understanding of 'SEND ranges' is inconsistent. This leads to variability in timeliness when schools assess the needs of pupils with SEND. In the strongest practice, early intervention meets younger children's SEND needs well and some children have EHC plans prior to starting primary schools.
- The AP admission information available to the PRU generally provides an up-to-date picture of the child or young person's individual needs. In contrast, information available to early years providers, and to schools, for admissions of children and young people is not as thorough. As a result, some pupils may experience incomplete support on entry to their new education provider.
- A lack of information-sharing with schools means some schools do not consistently know about referrals being made to wider services. This places increased demands on school leaders' capacity to manage case loads when several information requests are made to schools at once. However, requests for information have appropriate deadlines.
- Children and young people can access a range of clubs and activities outside of school. However, some do not access the clubs available as the offer is not well known by children, young people and their families. Frequently, families of children and young people with SEND told inspectors that transport is an issue to access clubs and activities.
- Despite their best efforts, some special schools struggle for space. There is further need for space if children and young people require assistive devices, such as wheelchairs and standing frames. However, the partnership has identified additional building space to alleviate capacity issues in special school provision.
- The Vulnerable Pupil Panel (VPP) is a forum for schools to discuss an individual child or young person's needs. Schools self-refer complex cases to the VPP. This means that some children and young people's needs may be missed if the school does not proactively seek support.

Areas for improvement

Areas for improvement

Leaders should continue to strengthen their governance arrangements to deliver and monitor the implementation and effectiveness of their SEND strategy across the partnership. This includes ensuring that:

- the partnership continues to strengthen and further improve the quality of data it uses to accurately identify where there are gaps in provision and commission appropriate services to effectively address those gaps;
- the partnership strengthens the information that is currently available to all partners and uses this effectively in order to hold each other accountable for the effective commissioning and delivery of services to improve outcomes for children and young people;
- the planned increase in special school places for post-16 students proceeds to timeframe to alleviate capacity issues in special school provision.

Leaders in health should continue to take action to reduce waiting times across some health services, including neuro-developmental pathways as well as therapies that include occupational therapy and speech and language therapy. In the intervening waiting period, the partnership should continue to mitigate the impact for children and young people.

Leaders should continue to strengthen the systems and processes to further improve the quality of children and young people's EHC plans, including updates to EHC plans following annual reviews, to ensure that EHC plans reflect the most up-to-date information from education, health and social care.

Leaders should continue to strengthen the systems and processes to support children and young people to access support and assessment for a learning disability. The partnership should ensure that these children and young people receive suitable support across education, health and social care that meets their needs well.

Local area partnership details

Local authority	Integrated care board
Darlington Borough Council	North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board
James Stroyan Executive Director of People	Samantha Allen Chief Executive of the Integrated Care Board
www.darlington.gov.uk	www.northeastnorthcumbria.nhs.uk
Town Hall Feethams Darlington County Durham DL1 5QT	Parkhouse Building Baron Way Kingmoor Park Cumbria CA6 4SJ

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 from education and social care; a lead Children's Services Inspector from the Care Quality Commission (CQC); and another Children's Services Inspector from the CQC.

Inspection team

Ofsted

David Mills, Ofsted HMI Lead inspector

Mary Cook, Ofsted HMI

Jo Warburton, Ofsted HMI

Care Quality Commission

David Roberts, CQC Lead inspector

Sandra Smith, CQC inspector

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.gov.uk/ofsted

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