

Area SEND inspection of Dudley Local Area Partnership

Inspection dates: 20 to 24 January 2025

Dates of previous inspection: 31 January 2022 to 3 February 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 local area partnership is made up of Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council and Black Country Integrated Care Board (ICB). They are jointly responsible for the planning and commissioning of services for children and young people with SEND in Dudley.

The commissioning of health services changed across England in 2022. The Black Country ICB became responsible for the commissioning of health services in Dudley in July 2022. The ICB serves Dudley and three other areas, each with dedicated teams of officers. Since the last inspection, there has been a change to the Director of Children's Services. The current director has been in place since July 2024.

The local area partnership commissions a range of alternative provisions (AP). These provide education for children or young people, including those who cannot attend school due to social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) and medical needs. They also provide education for those who are at risk of, or who have been, permanently excluded from school.

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 Dudley have inconsistent experiences despite positive changes happening in recent months. Historical weaknesses and gaps in support and services for children and young people with SEND mean that there is still work to do to ensure that they receive the help that they need. Parents and carers who responded to our survey echo this view, reporting that their children's experiences have not been as strong as they could have been.

Many children and their families receive help and advice from early help workers, who have a strong understanding of the needs of children with SEND, and this knowledge helps them identify the right pathway for support. However, feedback from the parent carer forum (PCF), children and young people with SEND, families and professionals, is that the local offer is not effective and is difficult to navigate. Despite the local area partnership providing a range of services, there are weaknesses in how well these are communicated through the local offer. This means that some children and young people with SEND and their families do not know what is available to support their needs.

Some children and young people and their families access a range of short break provision through direct payments and overnight care support. This provides some additional support for parents and carers and enables children to access community activities. However, there are not enough short breaks available to meet their needs. This is due to a lack of availability of short breaks and direct payment workers and the reduction of help with suitable transport.

Children with SEND make a positive start in the early years. Settings are proactive in nurturing co-production with families. Settings access useful support from health, social care and early years services to ensure an accurate understanding of children's needs. Consequently, most children are well prepared for transition to primary school.

Those with education, health and care (EHC) plans receive targeted support to help prepare them well for adulthood. However, this is not always the case, and some aspects of this support are at an early stage of implementation. Children and young people contribute to and participate in community events but told inspectors that they would like more of these.

For some children and young people with SEND, early identification and assessment of their needs has not been timely or accurate enough. As a result, their experiences have been inconsistent because of a lack of clarity about their SEND. This is improving for most children and young people with SEND. For instance, children and young people with SEND who access specialist settings, including AP, receive timely and appropriate support. It is more often the case that caring and attentive staff in specialist settings put appropriate provision in place.

There is significant variation in how long children and young people wait for support from

health services. For instance, access to occupational therapy and physiotherapy services happen in a timely manner. However, waiting times for mental health appointments after an initial assessment are far too long, as are the times for diagnosis for autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). There are a range of services available to support children and young people before and after a diagnosis, but families and schools report they are not aware of what is available. This leads to significant frustration and distress for children and their families.

Children and young people with SEND receiving help and protection from social care receive effective support and guidance. They benefit from timely needs assessments to help identify their future care needs in preparation for adulthood. Social workers know children and young people with SEND well and capture their views and wishes in their records. Children and young people with SEND are visited regularly so that their changing needs can be accurately assessed and so that professionals maintain oversight of their safety and well-being. Workers are open about the challenges children, young people with SEND and their families can face in obtaining services and the time they have to wait, and they act as strong advocates for them.

What is the area partnership doing that is effective?

- The local area partnership has been on a significant journey since the last inspection. There is a shared culture and ambition for children and young people with SEND across the borough.
- Leaders and officers involved in developing the education sufficiency strategy and inclusive pathways are highly regarded across the partnership. These officers are precise in their evaluations and can clearly articulate where the remaining gaps in children and young people's provision are, for example support for secondary-aged girls with social, emotional and mental health needs or children and young people with school-related anxiety.
- Practitioners from different services work well together. They share information effectively, and this results in an efficient multi-disciplinary approach to providing services for children and young people. Across those services working with children and young people, there is a strong sense of partnership working and a shared vision for all children and young people.
- Partnership work with the PCF is strong and is helping to drive improvement. The PCF holds an accurate, up-to-date picture of parental views and concerns. In addition, they also provide constructive feedback and challenge regarding the experience of children and young people with SEND and their families. For example, the PCF has provided the local area with significant feedback which highlighted the needs for improvements to wheelchair services.
- There is a well-established and robust dynamic support register (DSR) with a specific allocation to Dudley. This is effectively identifying children or young people with SEND who are at risk of admission to mental health inpatient services. A comprehensive key working offer is provided for all children and young people who are supported via the DSR process. The transition between children's and adults' DSR works well, and the

ICB has now extended the DSR offer to those up to 30 years of age.

- The inclusive pathways service is well regarded, and children and young people who access this service are well supported with clear expectations and identified provisions. Needs are accurately identified and well monitored in order to achieve strong outcomes. Schools and specialist settings shared with inspectors that those children who are known to this service are likely to benefit from high-quality support. For example, those transferring to AP receive strong provision from day one because of how well their needs are known and communicated through the inclusive pathways service.
- The local partnership has put in place an effective AP strategy to increase the number of suitable places across the local area for some of the most vulnerable children and young people. They have worked effectively with providers to establish this. There are already examples of new provisions which are impacting positively on the children and young people who attend.
- The virtual school proactively engages and offers their expertise beyond children who are looked after. Their work across the partnership to support other settings is a strength. For instance, the virtual school provides extensive training to settings about how best to support children and young people who have experienced trauma.
- Most children and young people who need speech and language therapy, physiotherapy or occupational therapy receive effective help when they need it.
- There is effective support from designated practitioners in health, education and social care for those children and young people who are not in employment, education or training. For instance, the fair access panel acts swiftly to find suitable settings to admit those children and young people out of education.
- Despite significant workforce challenges, the SEND information, advice and support service supports a high number of parents and carers of children and young people with SEND. The local area partnership is currently seeking to increase the team's capacity.

What does the area partnership need to do better?

- The local partnership accepts that more needs to be done to ensure that the voice of children and young people and their families are heard at every stage. The inspection surveys match this evaluation. Those who responded to the inspection surveys reported that children and young people with SEND do not always feel heard. The impact of improved engagement strategies on children and young people and their families is not yet felt by parents. Dissatisfaction remains high as a result.
- Health leaders have undertaken a transformation review of services for children and young people with neurodevelopmental needs across the partnership. The focus has changed to provide a needs-led approach to services so that children can get the support they need when they need it without the need for a diagnosis. There is a plan to work through the implementation of this new approach to support children with neurodevelopmental needs. This is in the early stages of implementation.
- Children and young people are waiting too long for neurodevelopmental assessments

for autism and ADHD. This means that, for some individuals, appropriate help is not provided early enough, and difficulties are exacerbated.

- Most children and young people wait too long for mental health support after their initial appointment with child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). Some wait for over two years for their therapy, which means that their mental health needs are not supported when this is needed most. The CAMHS team maintains oversight of these children through telephone contact and signposts them to useful emotional well-being services which they can access while they are waiting.
- Children and young people with SEND who use and need wheelchairs are waiting too long to get an assessment of their mobility needs. Inspectors saw records of children waiting over 12 months for appointments and to receive the required equipment. The negative impact on these children and young people is significant.
- There remains too much variability in the quality of EHC plans. Recently, there have been considerable changes to the formulation, timescales and reviewing of plans. However, many of these changes are yet to have a positive impact. Consequently, many plans sampled during the inspection do not reflect the needs of children and young people accurately enough. Settings told inspectors that this often complicates how quickly they can put the right provision in place. The partnership is fully aware of these gaps in the drafting and quality assurance of EHC plans and subsequent reviews. The partnership has prioritised the EHC plans of children and young people with SEND at points of transition, such as when moving from primary to secondary education.
- Many services across the health system are not receiving the most recent versions of children and young people's EHC plans. Only a small number of EHC plans were recorded in the sampled clinical records. Therefore, there is a key missing element in a child or young person's clinical record to inform and support multi-agency working. This results in some children and young people with SEND not receiving the right support at the right time.
- There are sufficiency challenges in finding and identifying suitable placements for some looked-after children who have SEMH needs. Some children have had multiple moves in a short period of time. This has impacted negatively on their education, learning and wider development. For some, their EHC plans are not up to date and so do not reflect this impact accurately.
- The current local offer is inaccessible and does not contain the necessary information for children, young people, parents and carers. It is hard to navigate and parents and carers who responded to the surveys do not have confidence that it has the information they need. The partnership agrees that the current website is not practical. Leaders, in partnership with the PCF, have recently made considerable changes and are in the process of launching a new online local offer.

Areas for improvement

Areas for improvement
The local partnership needs to increase the pace of work to reduce the length of time that children and young people wait for CAMHS intervention, neurodevelopmental

diagnosis and access to wheelchair services. They should also ensure that these children have access to suitable support while they are waiting.

The local area partnership should improve the quality and oversight of the EHC plan processes to ensure that they are consistently reviewed, updated and shared with all relevant agencies and professionals. EHC plans must reflect accurately up-to-date views from children and young people and their families, along with appropriate information from education, social care and health services. Finalised EHC plans should also be shared with all relevant agencies and professionals.

To ensure an improved understanding of the services which are available, the local partnership should be diligent in communicating the launch of the new local offer. The local partnership should also continually monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the local offer so that it is useful for parents, carers and professionals.

Local area partnership details

Local authority	Integrated care board
Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council	Black Country Integrated Care Board
Karen Graham, Director of Children's Services (interim)	Mark Axcell, Chief Executive Officer
www.dudley.gov.uk	www.blackcountry.icb.nhs.uk
Council House, Priory Road, Dudley DY1 1HF.	Civic Centre, St Peters Square, Wolverhampton WV1 1SH

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

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