Area SEND inspection of Westmorland and Furness Local Area Partnership

Inspection dates: 3 to 7 February 2025

Dates of previous inspection: not applicable

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 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

Westmorland and Furness Council, North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (NENC ICB) and Lancashire and South Cumbria Integrated Care Board (LSC ICB) are jointly responsible for the planning and commissioning of services for children and young people with SEND in Westmorland and Furness.

This was the first inspection of the Westmorland and Furness local area, which was established as a new local authority on 1 April 2023 following local government reorganisation that also created the Cumberland unitary authority. The Cumbria local area partnership was disaggregated in December 2023, and the Westmorland and Furness local area partnership was inaugurated in January 2024. The director of children's services joined the council in July 2023 and a new cabinet member for children's services was appointed in October 2024. The assistant director for education and inclusion has been in post since January 2024.

The commissioning of health services changed across England in 2022. On 1 July 2022, NENC ICB and LSC ICB became responsible for the commissioning of health services in Cumbria, and since 1 April 2023 for Westmorland and Furness local area.

Westmorland and Furness council commissions one pupil referral unit and a range of other alternative provision (AP). These provide education for children or young people who cannot attend school due to their needs, or for those who have been, or are at risk of being, permanently excluded from school. Schools also commission their own AP.

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

Children and young people with SEND are valued in Westmorland and Furness, and leaders are strongly committed to supporting them. However, their experiences vary. Inconsistencies across the education, health and social care partnership negatively impact on the experiences of some children and young people with SEND.

The parent carer forum, SEND Alliance Cumbria (SENDAC), and the SEND information, advice and support service are well established. These groups support parents and families by, for example, helping them through the education, health and care (EHC) plan application process. They provide support for parents to liaise with school staff. Young people's groups, such as the youth parliament and the young inspectors, are strong advocates for children and young people with SEND. As examples of their input, these groups have recently been working with the police on a campaign to reduce hate crime. They have also been part of groups presenting a neurodevelopmental manifesto to local area partnership leaders for consideration.

Some parents, carers and practitioners reported that communication from the local area partnership can be ineffective or too slow. The local offer is not considered to be an effective tool. As a result, there is frustration from families about its ability to signpost children, young people and their families to the services that are available to support and guide them.

Families describe the excellent support that they receive from some individual practitioners. However, they also reported that processes and procedures used to meet their children's needs, can be complex, time consuming and challenging to navigate. In addition, access to services for some children and families is hindered by the significant travel time and distances involved. Leaders have correctly recognised the areas that require further development and have started to make improvements. However, for some children, young people and families, the impact of these improvements is yet to be felt.

Many children and young people are successfully supported to move on to the next stage of education, employment or training. For example, there is a thriving supported internship programme in Westmorland and Furness. This supports children and young people to prepare for adulthood and, for many young people, leads to meaningful employment.

Most children and young people receive effective support to attend school regularly. In addition to this, many children and young people with SEND are supported successfully to achieve well at school. This is reflected in the number of children and young people with SEND who achieve at least a grade 4 in English and mathematics GCSEs.

Too many children and young people wait too long to receive an assessment of their neurodevelopmental needs. Work is underway to reduce waiting times, in addition to meeting the needs of children and young people while they wait. However, the impact of these initiatives is not yet widely felt by families or multi-agency practitioners across

Westmorland and Furness.

The local area partnership recognises that there is more to be done to signpost children, young people and their parents to the community activities on offer. Many parents, children and young people would like greater access to clubs and activities. This is not always possible, due to club organisers' occasional lack of understanding and training to accommodate children and young people with SEND.

The voice of children, young people and their families is being more consistently represented in new EHC plans. However, advice and recommendations about a child or young person's health, education and social care are not consistently included in all EHC plans and/or when annual reviews have been completed. This negatively impacts on multi-agency planning to provide children and young people with coordinated care when needed.

What is the area partnership doing that is effective?

- The partnership is ambitious for children and young people with SEND. Leaders understand what is working well and what needs further improvement. The updated Westmorland and Furness joint strategic needs assessment provides reliable data to help inform the commissioning of services. Improvement work includes the attendance strategy, support for young people at risk of not being in education, employment or training and priorities for the updated SEND strategy. More recently, many school leaders feel more heard in Westmorland and Furness and value being part of the area's improvement planning. However, some initiatives are still embedding, and it is too soon to see their impact on children and young people's lived experiences.
- The local area partnership values 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) with families and professionals. SENDAC is a key strategic voice, helping to shape strategies like redesigning the local offer. As a result, families feel more empowered and confident that their views and experiences are considered in decision-making.
- The timeliness and quality of EHC plans are improving. Most EHC assessments are now completed within statutory timeframes, helping children to receive the necessary support in a timely manner.
- Children and young people receive timely support from speech and language therapy, physiotherapy and occupational therapy services. This is as a result of effective triage arrangements and signposting to services. The child and adolescent mental health services' (CAMHS) needs-led approach to triage ensures that children and young people assessed as priority cases are dealt with quickly. However, accessing some services before reaching this point remains a challenge for some. The healthy child programme ensures early identification of needs through timely visits, reducing the risk of delays to child development.
- The dynamic support register and associated key workers are used effectively to

identify and support children and young people at risk of being placed in acute settings because of, for example, poor mental health. This helps to ensure that vulnerable children and young people are supported in their own homes and within their own communities where possible.

- Significant investment in family help provision enhances agency coordination. Early help workers collaborate with external agency organisations to support children and young people with SEND. In addition, strong links with child-centred police teams ensure that autism-aware officers respond appropriately to children, reducing any distress during interactions.
- The specialist children with disabilities (CWD) social work team provides tailored support to children with complex needs, ensuring that their voices are heard. When residential care is required, a multidisciplinary approach ensures careful decision-making. Social workers and independent reviewing officers frequently visit children and young people who are placed at a distance from the local area. This helps to ensure that children and young people receive high-quality care, even when placed away from their communities.
- Autism pathway navigators provide essential support for families awaiting neurodevelopmental pathway assessments. This reduces anxiety during this uncertain period. However, families on the attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) pathway cannot consistently access the same service.
- Transitions to further education are supported by a developing localised offer, with special school leaders helping to shape an inclusive post-16 curriculum. This means that the needs of more young people with SEND can be met within the local area.
- The CWD team and transition workers ensure that young people access adult services, healthcare and mental health support. Expanding housing options have enabled more young adults with SEND to live in community-based homes, improving transition experiences.
- The partnership commissions a range of AP and plans further expansion. Young people in these settings often achieve positive educational outcomes and move on to successful post-16 placements. Local area leaders ensure that appropriate checks are made to ensure the quality of these provisions.
- Most families, children and young people who expressed a view reported that special schools and other specialist settings provide effective support to meet children and young people's needs. Mainstream schools work closely with the local authority to promote inclusion. However, some families remain concerned about whether these schools can meet all of their children's needs.
- Leaders prioritise safeguarding. They have embedded safeguarding assurance into service commissioning. This helps to protect children and young people with SEND and appropriately prioritises their well-being.

What does the area partnership need to do better?

- As a new partnership, Westmorland Furness and its partners had to quickly establish itself and adapt to meet the needs of the local area. Leaders have started mobilizing

resources and staffing through strong joint working and commissioning to address these challenges. However, further work is needed to ensure equal access to services across the local area.

- Although co-production has been used to develop service provision, more needs to be done to ensure that leaders successfully incorporate the voices of children and young people.
- Gaps in service provision remain a challenge, particularly in health and social care. Planning to move from children's to adults' services often starts too late, leaving some young people unprepared for the change. Similarly, fragmented pathways for neurodivergent assessment and diagnosis, especially for ADHD, result in long waiting times and inconsistent support while children and young people are waiting. Many families and professionals are unaware of available services, and some general practitioners (GPs) described the neurodevelopmental pathway as inconsistent. These gaps lead to delays in diagnosis and care, which at times contribute to worsening conditions, greater stress for families, and a lack of preparation for adulthood. This can impact negatively on young people's health and well-being.
- The identification and assessment of children's needs are not always timely. This is often due to a lack of coordination between education, health and social care. When children or young people's needs go unrecognised, they can escalate to crisis levels, requiring more intensive intervention later. This issue extends to the quality of EHC plans, which is inconsistent. Some EHC plans lack crucial health and social care information and do not always reflect young people's aspirations, limiting their preparation for adulthood. Health practitioners provide valuable input into EHC plan decision-making, but their recommendations are not consistently included. Health practitioners can also be excluded from reviewing draft EHC plans, reducing their ability to challenge any inaccuracies.
- Limited sensory processing support leads to families seeking private assessments. However, practitioners sometimes struggle to meet the expectations set by these assessments due to the lack of available services. In CAMHS, service gaps between social, emotional and mental health support and core CAMHS support create additional difficulties. Children who do not meet the threshold for core CAMHS often receive time-limited interventions from voluntary services. However, when these services end, many struggle to access further mental health support, leaving them without a clear pathway for continued care.
- Issues with information-sharing and digital infrastructure also create risks, particularly in general practice. Some GPs reported that they are not always informed when children have learning disabilities, due to the absence of digital links between health and children's social care. Although manual processes help to mitigate this to some extent, the lack of integration means that some children may not be added to the annual health check register. Additionally, GPs often find themselves in a difficult position, having to prescribe alternative medications while children wait for neurodevelopmental assessments – an area they are not funded to manage. This raises concerns about prescribing medications that may not ultimately be needed post-diagnosis.
- While efforts are underway to improve services, such as redesigning the

neurodevelopmental pathway through co-production with external agencies, more work is needed to demonstrate meaningful impact. A lack of clear communication, signposting and access to available support pathways means that some children and young people do not receive the right services at the right time.

Areas for improvement

Areas for improvement
The local area partnership must ensure that waiting times for neurodevelopmental assessments are reduced, and that support services are routinely available and accessible to families while they wait.
Leaders across the partnership must improve communication to professionals, parents and carers, and children and young people. Their strategies, actions and available services should be better understood, further developing trust in the SEND system. This includes updating the local offer regularly so that it remains useful.
Leaders must continue to strengthen the systems and processes to further improve the quality of children and young people's EHC plans, including updates following annual reviews. This is to ensure that plans consistently reflect the most up-to-date information from education, health and social care.
Area leaders should strengthen multi-agency working across the partnership, between education, health and social care, so that children and young people's needs are identified and assessed in a more efficient and timely manner.

Local area partnership details

Local authority	Integrated care board	Integrated care board
Westmorland and Furness	Lancashire and South Cumbria Integrated Care Board	North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board.
Director of Children's Services – Milorad Vasic	Chief Executive – Kevin Lavery	Chief Executive – Sam Allen
www.westmorlandandfurness.gov.uk	www.lancashireandsouthcumbria.icb.nhs.uk	https://northeastnorthcumbria.nhs.uk
South Lakeland House, Lowther Street, Kendal, Cumbria LA9 4DQ	Level 3, Christ Church Precinct, County Hall, Fishergate Hill, Preston PR1 8XB	Pemberton House, Colima Avenue, Sunderland SR5 3XB

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: an HMI Inspector from social care and an Ofsted Inspector from education; 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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