

Area SEND inspection of Wirral Local Area Partnership

Inspection dates: 27 January 2025 to 31 January 2025

Dates of previous inspection: 27 September 2021 to 1 October 2021

Inspection outcome

There are widespread and/or systemic failings leading to significant concerns about the experiences and outcomes of children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), which the local area partnership must address urgently.

A monitoring inspection will be carried out within approximately 18 months. The next full reinspection will be within approximately three years.

As a result of this inspection, His Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI) requires the local area partnership to prepare and submit a priority action plan (area SEND) to address the identified areas for priority action.

Information about the local area partnership

Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council and NHS Cheshire and Merseyside Integrated Care Board (ICB) are jointly responsible for the planning and commissioning of services for children and young people with SEND in Wirral.

There have been several changes to the senior leadership of Wirral's SEND services since the previous inspection. These include the appointment of a new director of children's services; a new lead member for children, young people and education; the creation of a dedicated Assistant Director for SEND & Inclusion; and a Joint Strategic Commissioner for Children & Young People, which is jointly funded by the Council and ICB. The commissioning of health services changed across England in 2022. On 1 July 2022, NHS Cheshire and Merseyside ICB became responsible for the commissioning of health services in Wirral.

The local authority commissions alternative provision (AP) for children and young people, including those who cannot attend school due to social, emotional, mental health and medical needs, or for those who are at risk of or have been permanently excluded. The local authority does not commission any other AP.

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

Children and young people in Wirral with SEND are experiencing the effects of long-

standing failings of the local area partnership. This is all too frequently characterised by waiting lists, and delays and failures to identify children and young people's needs. Some of these failings are historic. There are signs that things are beginning to improve. However, work to bring about these improvements is at a very early stage for children, young people and their families, and is not yet having a positive impact on their experiences or outcomes.

Children and young people bear the consequences of weak systems for education, health and care (EHC) plans. Furthermore, many EHC plans are rarely, if ever, updated to reflect the reviews that education settings carry out. Consequently, these plans no longer reflect the needs of the children and young people concerned and their needs sometimes go unmet. Opportunities to listen to the voices of children and young people are lost. Inspectors heard many examples where parents, carers and professionals who support children and young people feel frustrated and helpless. Some of them have felt this way for years.

By contrast, the needs of the youngest children are typically identified promptly through the healthy child programme. For example, the local area partnership has provided training to early years practitioners to help them to identify and support children who could develop speech and language difficulties. However, those children who need specialist speech and language assessments wait many months for an appointment. This is because the partnership has taken insufficient action to reduce waiting lists to an acceptable level.

Many children and young people with SEND in Wirral do not benefit from the strong preparation that they need for adulthood. For example, some young people with SEND find secondary school and post-16 education difficult because their mental health needs have not been addressed successfully. Some of these young people disengage from learning altogether.

Young people with SEND enjoy opportunities to engage in activities provided in their local communities. For example, the Pilgrim Street arts centre offers a range of opportunities, such as music, arts and crafts. This enables young people to discover and pursue talents and interests, and to build positive relationships with the adults who support them.

Young people attending AP are typically well supported. They receive the help that they need to re-engage in learning. The partnership has taken effective steps to set out the local offer through a dedicated website known as 'SENDLO'. This has been broadly welcomed by families who make use of the website.

What is the area partnership doing that is effective?

- The partnership board has recognised that it has not acted quickly enough to address the many weaknesses that it faces. Things are changing for the better. The board has now made a number of improvements to the way that it works. For example, it has put in place clear structures for the oversight of its work. New staff have been

recruited to key positions. However, most of these improvements are at a very early stage of implementation. Nonetheless, these changes mark a reinvigorated and more ambitious intent for the children and young people with SEND in Wirral.

- Leaders now make better use of available data to guide their work. For example, the partnership uses the joint strategic needs assessment to understand current and future health and social care needs. This is providing the partnership with a more accurate picture on which to base its strategic work for children and young people with SEND.
- The partnership has taken steps to engage with practitioners, parents, carers and children and young people in order to develop 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). For example, parents, carers and young people oversaw the design and execution of an event to inform families of the options beyond school for young people with SEND. This event was very well attended. The partnership has ensured that there is representation of all key partners at a strategic level, including the Parent Carer Forum.
- A set of protocols for the commissioning of AP has been co-produced by headteachers and the local authority. This is aimed at ensuring that there is sufficient AP of a suitable quality. Leaders of registered and unregistered AP settings meet regularly with leaders of mainstream schools. This is supporting a shared understanding of the wider picture in terms of children's and young people's needs.
- There are pockets of strong and effective multi-agency working that stand out positively in the local area partnership's work. For example, in a family hub, practitioners from speech and language, the home visiting service, and early help services work together to identify the needs of very young children. In another example, senior practitioners work with a range of professionals to identify and remove barriers between agencies that might otherwise prevent children with complex medical needs receiving the support that they need.
- A local initiative known as BRANCH offers the opportunity for children, young people and their families to undertake a digital assessment of their emotional and mental health needs. This results in helpful information about local and national services that are matched to needs. Moreover, a well-organised process for multi-disciplinary triage identifies the most urgent cases. As a result, this small group of children and young people receive swifter access to the services that they need.
- The partnership has ensured that children with the most complex health and care needs and diagnosed learning disabilities are included on the dynamic support database. Social workers in the children with disabilities team effectively use a range of skills to support their work with these children, young people and families. For example they are trained to use sign language and other methods of communication, alongside specific SEND training. This helps to ensure that those children with the most complex needs and their families receive sensitive, responsive and effective support through intensive packages of care. This helps to avoid unplanned hospital admissions and family breakdown.

What does the area partnership need to do better?

- There are long-standing, systemic weaknesses in the processes underpinning EHC plans in Wirral. The wait for assessments for an EHC plan is unacceptably long. The partnership routinely fails to comply with statutory timescales for the issue and review of plans. Some existing plans are not reviewed for several years. Consequently, the information that they contain is out of date and does not reflect children's and young people's current needs.
- EHC plans, once issued, frequently fall below an acceptable standard for quality. In many EHC plans, important contributions from social care and health professionals are notably absent. Some plans contain basic mistakes and errors that make them difficult to understand. Others contain incorrect or generic information that does not relate to the child or young person for whom the plan is intended. For some, there are inaccuracies about children's and young people's circumstances that prevent the plans from being distributed to the people currently caring for them. These weaknesses cause distress and even hamper the efforts of parents and practitioners to meet children's and young people's needs.
- The partnership has been late in developing a joint strategic approach to preparation for adulthood. This is reflected in poorly coordinated support between education, health and care partners for those young people with SEND as they transition into adult services. EHC plans do not set out clearly how these agencies intend to support the young person and their family at this critical time. Some of these young people experience anxiety and distress because they do not know what is going to happen to them when they leave school or their current care arrangements.
- Children and young people in need of specialist assessments for speech, language and communication difficulties experience extremely long waits for an appointment. There is a lack of support for these children while they wait for their assessments. This situation is compounded further by the high turnover of therapy staff. Families and early years settings experience poor communication throughout these long waiting times, while children's needs continue to go unmet.
- At the time of the inspection, the ICB had not continued their work to assess the quality and impact of annual learning disability health checks. This has hampered the board's work to ensure that critical screening appointments are taken up, and that subsequent planning for this group of children and young people is effective.
- Access to medical equipment, such as aids for standing or sitting, is not clearly organised across the partnership. For example, children in early years settings, and those who are educated in mainstream schools or at home, have ready access to equipment via a designated store. However, some children and young people, such as those in special schools, are subject to different, less clear, arrangements. This causes inequality in the access to such equipment, with some children experiencing delays as a result.
- Despite the positive steps taken to improve the quality of AP, the partnership's thinking at a more strategic level has been slow to develop. An overall strategy is not due to be formulated until April 2025. This limits the partnership's ability to hold

leaders to account for the impact of their work on improving outcomes for those children and young people who attend AP. Moreover, it limits the opportunity for further co-production between area partners.

- Some general practitioners in Wirral do not offer shared care for children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder who require medication. This can lead to unexpected financial difficulties for some families. For example, those who select the 'right to choose' pathway to neurodevelopmental assessment will need to fund any necessary medication themselves until a community paediatrician ratifies the prescription. The ICB has recently drafted guidance aimed at ensuring greater consistency in the commissioning of shared care. However, implementation is at too early a stage to have had an impact for children and young people.
- Children and young people, their parents and carers, and practitioners experience poor communication from the partnership. For example, practitioners and families are commonly unaware of recent or planned changes to current practice. This compounds the lack of confidence in the partnership's commitment to making sustainable change for the children and young people of Wirral with SEND. Considerable work remains to regain the hearts and minds of professionals and parents, who feel let down and lack trust in the partnership.

Areas for priority action

Responsible body	Areas for priority action
Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council and NHS Cheshire and Merseyside ICB	<p>The partnership should ensure that as a matter of urgency, effective action is taken to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensure that EHC plans consistently identify and meet the needs of children and young people effectively • ensure that the timeliness of initial EHC plans, and subsequent annual reviews, comply with statutory guidance.
Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council and NHS Cheshire and Merseyside ICB	<p>The partnership should work together to develop and embed a joint framework on preparation for adulthood, to ensure a fully coordinated approach across education, health and care, to support young people with SEND as they transition into adulthood.</p>
NHS Cheshire and Merseyside ICB	<p>The partnership should ensure that waiting times for specialist speech and language and neurodevelopmental assessments are reduced and that children and young people, and their families, consistently receive effective communication and support while waiting.</p>

Areas for improvement

Areas for improvement

The partnership should work together to improve and strengthen communication of information across Wirral between senior leaders, front line practitioners and, importantly, children, young people and their families. This includes information about proposed and current strategy and about changes to operational practice.

Local area partnership details

Local authority	Integrated care board
Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council	NHS Cheshire and Merseyside ICB
Elizabeth Hartley, Director for Children, Families and Education	Graham Urwin, Chief Executive
www.wirral.gov.uk	www.cheshireandmerseyside.nhs.uk
2 Alice Ker Square Birkenhead Wirral CH41 2AB	1 Lakeside 920 Centre Park Square Warrington WA1 1QY

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 HMIs 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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