

Area SEND inspection of Cambridgeshire Local Area Partnership

Inspection dates: 27 to 31 January 2025

Dates of previous inspection: 20 to 24 March 2017

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 take place within approximately three years.

Ofsted and the 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

Cambridgeshire County Council and the NHS Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Integrated Care Board (ICB) are responsible for planning and commissioning services to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND in Cambridgeshire, as part of the Cambridgeshire local area partnership. This oversees the commissioning of local education, social care and health provision for children and young people with SEND.

The local authority's director for children's services (DCS) has been appointed since the previous inspection. Prior to June 2023, the role of DCS covered both Cambridgeshire County Council and Peterborough City Council.

The commissioning of health services changed across England in 2022. On 1 July 2022, the responsibility for health services in Cambridgeshire passed from the NHS Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Clinical Commissioning Group to the NHS Cambridgeshire and Peterborough ICB.

The Cambridgeshire local area partnership commissions a range of alternative provision (AP) for children and young people with education, health and care plans (EHC plan). For children and young people who receive SEN support, the local area partnership devolves funding for AP to schools. Schools use this to commission AP for these pupils. The local area partnership is currently reviewing this process.

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 have variable experiences of having their needs accurately assessed, identified and met. Sometimes, this is positive. For example, if they have communication needs, speech and language therapy teams work closely with schools to identify this. Disabled children receive a timely and thorough assessment of need from social care. However, there are delays in completing EHC needs assessments and EHC annual reviews. This means these children and young people do not have their needs assessed or get the right support as quickly as they should.

Children and young people often have their health needs promptly assessed and supported. For example, the healthy child programme and health visits identify needs early on, including antenatally. Waiting times for many health services are appropriate. However, children and young people wait too long for neurodevelopmental assessments and diagnoses. While waiting, they receive variable support.

Sometimes, children and young people with SEND receive the help they require to have positive experiences and outcomes. For example, social care and early help teams deliver sensitive, bespoke support. Looked-after disabled children receive regular, multi-agency support to meet their needs, for example through the virtual school. Children and young people with SEND in residential settings receive the help they require to make positive progress in their education and well-being. Many families appreciate the support they receive such as through personal budgets and the short breaks service.

If children and young people with SEND struggle with absence from school, the area provides well-coordinated support. For instance, education inclusion officers work closely with schools to successfully overcome barriers to attendance. This helps them to be able to access support from other services, as well as benefit from regular educational provision. However, for some children and young people with SEND who are not in school, the support is less positive. Those who are electively home educated do not always get enough help. If they struggle, for example with their mental health, they are sometimes left without support.

The timeliness and quality of EHC plans and annual reviews are poor for many children and young people. Their voices are included routinely in EHC plans. For many, this captures their aspirations accurately. However, too often EHC plans do not reflect a child or young person's needs fully or the provision they require to achieve the outcomes intended. As a result, many professionals do not have the information they require to give the best support.

Children and young people with SEND typically achieve well in education. In national tests and assessments, in most age groups, they do as well as, or better than, similar children and young people in schools elsewhere.

For children and young people with SEND in special schools and AP, there is a small,

dedicated team that provides effective help with preparing children and young people for their next steps. Social care services support disabled children well at transitions to adult services. However, for many, the area's work to prepare them for adulthood is less successful. There is not enough coordinated support to develop the knowledge and skills they need to move on confidently to education, employment or training. Delays in annual reviews of EHC plans exacerbate this lack of coordinated support.

Some children and young peoples' families struggle to access support because of poor communication from the area. The well-established parent carer forum ensures that the experiences and needs of families are heard by the area. This informs how the partnership tailors some aspects of support to meet needs more precisely. Many parents and carers value this. However, dissatisfaction from families is rising because of frustrations at not being listened to enough regarding other aspects of the partnership's work.

The partnership's culture of using 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 children and young people with SEND is variable. In pockets, children and young people work with services to shape the support they require, such as designing a mental health toolkit. However, children and young people with SEND have few systematic opportunities to co-design support and services to better meet their needs.

Children and young people with SEND access a range of community activities to develop their independence and confidence. That said, some see little in place to support their social life. For some children and young people, this can leave them feeling isolated and unsupported.

What is the area partnership doing that is effective?

- Leaders have recently put in place a clear and coherent strategy to resolve challenges it currently faces. There are some early signs of the positive impact of this. For instance, the area has increased the number of 'Enhanced Resourced Bases' in schools. This helps some children and young people with SEND rejoin mainstream provision. However, it is too early to judge the effect of much of the current long-term strategy.
- Leaders are reflective about what has worked well, and areas to be developed, in the area's strategy over time. Recent leadership appointments have created more stability after some changes due to the reorganisation of how the local authority manages and delivers its SEND services. This creates the capacity to improve provision. Despite facing challenges, the area is allocating resources where most needed such as securing staffing.
- Governance of the SEND arrangements has been recently restructured. This now provides clear direction for commissioning choices. Oversight of health and social care arrangements for children and young people with SEND is usually robust.
- The strategy for AP has successfully supported children and young people with SEND

at the risk of permanent exclusion from school. This has meant far fewer have experienced permanent exclusion than similar children and young people in schools elsewhere. However, the area recognises its approach to AP is less effective than in the past. It is currently consulting on a new AP strategy.

- In the statutory assessment processes, work is not coordinated or audited well in a multi-agency way. However, in many other cases, there is a joined-up approach to supporting children and young people with SEND. In health services, joint commissioning is often successful. An example is effective speech and language therapy throughout the area. This multi-agency working often creates positive experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND.
- Some aspects of school support are effective. Special educational needs coordinators receive regular training and helpful resources. The area's 'ordinarily available provision' toolkit helps schools identify and support needs of those pupils not in receipt of an EHC plan.
- Reviews for looked-after children and young people with SEND are thorough and inclusive. These help to ensure that stable placements are maintained, which leads to them having more positive experiences.
- Across the area, many professionals work effectively to meet children and young people's needs successfully. Many children and young people with SEND praise the support they receive from staff in schools. In health, wheelchair and equipment services provide timely support. Occupational therapy and physiotherapy services are comprehensive and effective, with professionals going above and beyond to meet needs.
- The proportion of children and young people with SEND who are not in education, employment or training has been increasing since the pandemic. This is because there is not enough appropriate post-16 provision outside of colleges. There has been some early work to address this, which has begun to reverse this trend.

What does the area partnership need to do better?

- The partnership faces challenges in its provision for children and young people with SEND. Partly, these are caused by choices it has made in the past. For example, the partnership recognises that the amount of specialist provision in the area has not been sufficient. This has led to the partnership placing high numbers of children and young people with SEND in out-of-county provision. This creates difficulties both in terms of resources and oversight. It is enhancing appropriate local mainstream and specialist provision to rectify this.
- The statutory EHC plan processes are not working well enough. The timeliness of EHC needs assessments has fallen sharply. Staffing instability has been a factor in this. EHC plans are of variable quality. Although they capture children's aspirations and views well, health and social care information, while gathered, is not included appropriately. Annual reviews are often late, and EHC plans are left unamended. This hinders professionals from giving children and young people the help they need.
- In some cases, the area uses information about local priorities and the needs of

children and young people with SEND effectively. For example, health agencies share access to records. This means the area has the information it needs to commission health services that children and young people with SEND require. Yet the accuracy and quality of information the partnership uses are not consistent. This affects the promptness and precision of support the area offers. An example is for children and young people with SEND in elective home education. The area often does not have a recent picture of their needs, so is not able to provide effective support if they require it. The partnership knows its sharing of information is a weakness and is implementing revised systems for this.

- Sometimes, children and young people receive positive support for their mental health. The Mental Health in Schools teams only cover half of Cambridgeshire, but as a 'needs-led' service, it often supports well where required. Yet in some cases, services are either limited due to location or poorly communicated to those who need them. Families and professionals told inspectors they find referrals and accessing mental health support confusing and difficult to navigate. This is particularly so for those waiting for the neurodevelopmental pathway.
- The dynamic support register, which supports those at risk of hospital admission, does not work well enough. This is due to lack of investment in this by the local area partnership. Too many children and young people have unplanned admissions to hospital for mental health needs. This is the case whether or not the child or young person has a previous diagnosis. Communication between teams who support these vulnerable children and young people with SEND has been weak. Despite this, the local area partnership is now committed to improving the dynamic support register.
- Disabled children have their needs regularly reviewed by dedicated social care teams. This includes those who need a lower level of social care support. Teams also provide ongoing support and advice to parents. That said, only half of the learning disability annual health checks are completed in Cambridgeshire. This means that some children and young people with disabilities' health is not monitored in the way it should be.
- At times, the area puts in place appropriate support but schools and services, such as for mental health, do not know about these or understand how to deliver this. Where this is so, children and young people with SEND do not benefit from the area's support as well as they might.
- The effectiveness of the local area partnership's support for preparing for adulthood is inconsistent. In post-16, young people told inspectors they are supported well for their next steps by college staff. The small preparing for adulthood service provides high-quality support where it can such as in special schools. However, it has insufficient reach. The area does not give some children and young people with SEND enough help to build the skills and knowledge they need for their next steps. This is particularly the case in mainstream schools. EHC plans and annual reviews sometimes have minimal information about preparation for adulthood. Consequently, some children and young people with SEND are not as ready for or confident about their next stage as they could be.

Areas for improvement
<p>The local area partnership should work together to improve the timeliness and quality of the statutory EHC plan processes so that children and young people with SEND get the right support at the right time. This should include a particular focus on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ improving the timeliness of EHC plan needs assessments and annual reviews ■ improving the quality of EHC plans ■ amending EHC plans appropriately after annual review.
<p>The local area partnership should improve access to, and reduce waiting times for, specialist mental health pathways and neurodevelopmental assessments. Leaders should ensure that children and young people and their families consistently receive effective communication and support while waiting for neurodevelopmental assessments.</p>
<p>The local area partnership should develop better opportunities for co-production with children and young people with SEND, so their voices and views are more fully included in the design of support and services.</p>
<p>The local area partnership should improve the support for children and young people with SEND as they prepare for adulthood, especially in mainstream schools.</p>
<p>The local area partnership should improve how it communicates its offer, so schools, services and families know about and understand what the area seeks to provide. This will mean those who work most closely with children and young people with SEND will be better able to help them access the support available.</p>

Local area partnership details

Local authority	Integrated care board
Cambridgeshire County Council	NHS Cambridgeshire and Peterborough ICB
Martin Purbrick, Executive Director for Children, Education and Families	Jan Thomas, Chief Executive Officer
www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk	www.cpics.org.uk
New Shire Hall Emery Crescent Enterprise Campus Alconbury Weald Huntingdon PE28 4YE	Gemini House Bartholomew's Walk Cambridgeshire Business Park Angel Drove Ely Cambridgeshire CB7 4EA

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 two Children's Services Inspectors from the CQC.

Inspection team

Ofsted

Charlie Fordham, Ofsted HMI, Lead inspector
Russel Breyer, Ofsted HMI
Helen Stockdale, Ofsted Inspector

Care Quality Commission

Andrea Crosby-Josephs, CQC Lead inspector
Jessica Taylor-Beirne, CQC inspector
Tessa Valpy, 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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