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Area SEND monitoring inspection to Oldham Partnership

Between 24 November and 26 November 2025, Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) revisited Oldham Partnership, to decide whether effective action has been made in relation to each of the areas for priority action detailed in the inspection report published on 26 June 2023. The inspection was conducted under section 20 of the Children Act 2004.

I write on behalf of His Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI) of Education, Children's Services and Skills and the Chief Inspector of Primary Medical Services and the Chief Inspector of Primary Care and Community Services of CQC.

As a result of the findings of the initial inspection and in accordance with the Children Act 2004 (Joint Area Reviews) Regulations 2015, HMCI required the local area partnership to prepare and submit a priority action plan (area SEND) to address the two identified areas for priority action.

The local area has taken effective action as it has taken reasonable steps to address both of the areas for priority action identified at the initial inspection. This letter outlines our findings from the monitoring inspection.

The inspection was led by one of His Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) from Ofsted, accompanied by an HMI from social care; and a Children's Services Inspector from CQC.

During the inspection, we spoke to local area leaders, parents and carers of children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), and education, health and social care professionals. We also met with representatives of the parent carer forum (PCF), the Department for Education (DfE) and regional NHS England. We examined relevant documents and correspondence about the performance of the area in addressing the areas for priority action identified at the initial inspection, including the area's priority action plan and self-evaluation.

Findings

Area for priority action 1:

Leaders at Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council and NHS Greater Manchester ICB should cooperate to urgently improve the shared strategic governance, oversight, support, challenge and planning to deliver effective strategies to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND in Oldham.

Outcome: Effective action

Leaders from Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council and NHS Greater Manchester ICB now work within a more coherent model of shared strategic governance, overseen by an independently chaired executive board. The local area partnership has strengthened its collective strategic direction, and momentum, bringing partners together with a clearer shared purpose. This has ensured that key partners contribute more consistently to decision-making and the SEND improvement agenda.

Governance systems and processes have enhanced the oversight of strategic partners. Leaders draw on improved joint data systems and a shared performance dashboard to monitor progress, assess the impact of work streams and respond quickly when actions are not having the intended effect. This sharper use of intelligence enables education, health and social care partners to review information together and identify areas requiring attention. However, leaders recognise that access to data across all areas of the partnership needs to be further strengthened.

Clearer arrangements for support and challenge have strengthened the partnership. Structured boards and workstreams provide a forum for leaders to hold one another to account. Leaders use performance information and assurance findings to set high expectations and promote consistent practice across the partnership.

Strategic planning is now underpinned by more effective action plans which help ensure that decisions taken at a strategic level translate effectively into frontline delivery. These developments have begun to influence practice in education settings. School leaders, for example, have benefited from targeted training and partnership funded schemes, helping schools to meet need more effectively while children and young people await input from speech and language specialists.

Children and young people with SEND continue to play a central role in shaping improvement. Groups such as the 'Barrier Breakers' contribute important insight that informs developments, including enhancements to the local offer. Their experiences help ensure that strategic planning remains closely connected to the needs and aspirations of children and young people with SEND.

Partnership working among professionals is becoming more embedded. Practitioners emulate strategic cross-partnership challenge by holding one another to account more often. Cross-agency networking and strengthened relationships are supporting a more coordinated approach. Leaders draw on quality assurance and case review learning to help staff refine their practice. Families are beginning to see the benefits of this, with more consistent and coherent decision-making across services.

As a result of these combined improvements in governance, oversight, support, challenge and planning, the partnership has established firmer foundations for delivering effective strategies that meet the needs of children and young people with SEND in Oldham. Stakeholders, including the PCF, now have more meaningful opportunities to contribute to both strategic and operational activity. Their involvement in commissioned work, such as targeted short breaks and parenting support workshops, illustrates the move towards increasingly needs-led service design.

Leaders rightly recognise that there is still more work to do. However, they have established and committed to a more stable and collaborative environment in which improvement activity can progress and be evaluated systematically. The strengthened partnership across the local authority, the ICB and wider stakeholders now places Oldham in a stronger position to continue improving outcomes for children and young people with SEND.

Area for priority action 2:

Leaders at Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council and NHS Greater Manchester ICB, including commissioners and providers, should act urgently to identify and address the delays and gaps in service provision to meet the full range of needs of children and young people with SEND, aged 0 to 25, in Oldham. This includes speech and language provision, neurodevelopmental pathways and community paediatrics.

Outcome: Effective action

Joint commissioning arrangements have improved across health, education and social care. A joint commissioning board has been established, and regular joint commissioning meetings ensure that partners identify and address gaps in provision. Although some gaps in service provision remain, particularly in relation to emotional health and well-being support, leaders are aware of these shortfalls and recognise the need to expedite plans to address them.

Improvements have been made to address gaps in services that were identified at the last inspection, including the lack of provision for children and young people aged 16 to 18 who required access to child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS).

Children and young people are now benefiting from a more coherent and strengthened partnership response in identifying new or emerging needs, particularly in relation to speech and language and neurodiversity. This has increased the opportunity for the partnership to implement appropriate strategies and interventions at an earlier stage, providing timely support and reducing the risk of needs escalating.

Work has been undertaken to strengthen the support offer across several health services. This is particularly evident in speech and language therapy, where partners across health, education and social care have worked effectively at both strategic and operational levels to improve the quality and consistency of services that children and young people receive. In addition, leaders have taken steps to improve the support available to children and young people awaiting an assessment or diagnosis of autism or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). This includes the introduction of online resources, which, for some families, provide clear and accessible guidance that helps them understand needs earlier and implement supportive strategies while they wait, reducing anxiety and preventing difficulties from escalating.

Although partnership leaders have begun to reduce waiting times in some areas, such as community paediatrics, some children and young people still wait too long to access key health services. This includes speech and language therapy, learning disability services, and emotional health and wellbeing support, including CAMHS.

It has taken too long to address the lengthy times that children and young people, particularly aged 8 to 18 wait for initial assessment, intervention and diagnosis of autism and ADHD. Although there is ongoing work to redesign the neurodevelopmental pathways across Greater Manchester ICB, partnership and system leaders need to work closely together to make sure that this happens at pace.

Further work is required within social, emotional and mental health and wellbeing services to ensure that gaps in provision, such as for children aged 3 to 5, are addressed. Actions are needed to ensure timely access both to CAMHS and to lower level emotional support. This is essential to secure early identification of need and to ensure that the support offered while children are waiting is appropriate. More could be done to prevent children and young people from reaching crisis point.

There is a lack in strategic and operational clarity around diagnosing children and young people with a learning disability. This is a concern because having a diagnosis enables access to important services, such as the dynamic support register and annual health checks.

Next steps

Inspectors will reach an effective action outcome if, having gathered and evaluated evidence, they find that the local area partnership has taken reasonable steps to address the areas for priority action since the full inspection, based on the relevant evaluation criteria.

Effective action does not mean that the area for priority action is no longer a concern or that the local area can stop taking action to address it. Inspections are a point-in-time evaluation. Areas for priority action that receive an effective action outcome may still be identified as areas for priority action in future inspections. This can happen if the local area does not continue to take action and/or the action has not continued to have a positive impact on the experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND.

Ofsted and CQC ask the local area partnership to update their priority action plan (area SEND) as a result of this inspection.

I am copying this letter to DfE and regional NHS England.

Yours sincerely

Rebecca Sharples
His Majesty's Inspector, Ofsted, Lead inspector

Kathryn Grindrod
His Majesty's Inspector, Ofsted

David Roberts
Children's Services Inspector, CQC

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