

Area SEND inspection of Blackburn with Darwen Local Area Partnership

Inspection dates: 8 to 12 December 2025

Dates of previous inspection: 17 to 21 June 2019

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 3 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

Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council and NHS Lancashire and South Cumbria Integrated Care Board (ICB) are jointly responsible for the planning and commissioning of services for children and young people with SEND in Blackburn with Darwen.

There have been some changes to the senior leadership of Blackburn with Darwen's SEND services since the previous inspection. This includes the executive member for children, young people and education, the strategic director for children's services and education and the assistant director for early years, SEND and young people.

The commissioning of health services changed across England in 2022. On 1 July 2022, NHS Lancashire and South Cumbria ICB became responsible for the commissioning of health services in Blackburn with Darwen, and the role of executive lead for children and young people, SEND and safeguarding was established and is held by the executive chief nurse.

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

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

Some children and young people with SEND in the Blackburn with Darwen local area partnership have an inconsistent experience and outcomes. This is particularly the case for those waiting for specialist and adapted wheelchairs and older children and young people waiting for a diagnosis of their neurodevelopmental (ND) needs. This means some children and young people with SEND do not get as good an experience as others in Blackburn with Darwen.

For many children and young people with SEND, practitioners work well together to understand children's needs and are effective at providing the right support at the right time. However, some children and young people wait too long for their needs to be identified and met. For example, some children and young people wait too long to access specialist and adapted wheelchairs, occupational therapy services, speech and language therapy and a diagnosis of their ND needs. This is particularly the case for those children and young people aged between 16 to 25.

Typically, children and young people with SEND and their families receive a range of useful support while they wait for initial assessment as well as diagnosis. For example, there is an appropriate offer to help support children and young people's speech, language and communication needs and SEMH needs. When specialist mental health support is needed, children and young people are seen relatively promptly. The needs of children and young people, particularly with complex mental health needs, are well understood and services are well coordinated. There is also an offer of services to support those waiting for a diagnosis of their ND needs. However, many parents and carers, and some practitioners, are not always aware of what support is on offer and how to access this.

Children and young people with SEND mostly benefit from good-quality educational support, including those placed in AP. Children and young people, spoken with as part of this inspection, felt that because staff knew them well, their individual needs were typically successfully met. Leaders continue to improve provision and resource for children and young people with SEN support needs. Generally, children and young people's educational outcomes are positive, as is their attendance in school.

Overall, children and young people with SEND who have had a diagnosis and/or their needs met are well prepared for their next steps. Many are in suitable education, employment or training. They are well supported to transition into adulthood. This has been achieved by the partnership developing well-planned transition arrangements across education, health and social care. For example, successful multi-agency transition events are held when children and young people move from one educational phase to another.

Children and young people's voices are captured well in their education, health and care (EHC) plans. They are asked about their feelings, views and aspirations. Local area leaders are keen to hear about what children and young people think about what is on offer to them in Blackburn with Darwen. There are increasing opportunities for children

and young people with SEND to be part of decision-making and to share their views at a more strategic level.

Children and young people with SEND benefit from a wide range of appropriate and engaging activities and events offered by the partnership, including in school holidays. This helps children and young people meet new friends and enjoy the company of their peers. Those with the highest need receive effective support from early help and social workers, as well as carers, to access leisure and social activities in the community. This allows them to successfully learn and develop social skills as well as integrate into the local community.

What is the area partnership doing that is effective?

- Partnership leaders are committed to improving the experiences of children and young people with SEND and their families. There are strong relationships across the partnership, including caring professionals that work day-to-day with children and young people. The partnership has ensured that the newly formed parent carer forum (PCF) is a valued partner. The PCF has started to capture the voice of children and young people with SEND and their families.
- EHC plans are consistently completed and reviewed within statutory timescales. Those sampled during the inspection clearly set out children and young people's needs, the provision required for these children and young people, and the intended outcomes. They appropriately incorporate the child or young person's voice. Contributions from health and social care professionals are appropriate and ensure that the plan is a true multi-agency document. Appropriate aims and provision in relation for preparation for adulthood are typically evident in children and young people's EHC plans. In the main, EHC plans reflect the aspirations and experiences of children and young people very effectively, ensuring that they receive support that meets their individual needs.
- Babies, children and young people can access commissioned contacts, health assessments support and guidance from a well-embedded 0 to 19 team, whose members are readily accessible within all family hubs across Blackburn with Darwen. Midwifery and health visiting clinics are also successfully run within the hubs. This enables families to access the breadth of service offers within the hubs as they receive care from their midwife and health visitor.
- Young children benefit from a comprehensive and well-coordinated range of early years support. When required, bespoke packages of support are carefully tailored to individual needs, including parent and carer training and sensory strategies. This responsive provision ensures that children's needs are met effectively, enabling them to typically make sustained progress.
- The Dynamic Support Register is underpinned by involvement and joint working between professionals across education, health and social care. It assists children and young people with the highest need, who are at risk of their needs escalating. Children and young people with autism or a learning disability benefit from a keyworker service. This service supports children and young people with autism or

a learning disability by making sure that their needs, and those of their families, are fully understood. The keyworker service also helps to coordinate other relevant services, particularly when children and young people's needs are more complex.

- Children's community nurses, specialist nurses and special school nurses demonstrate bespoke, considered care to children and young people with SEND in Blackburn with Darwen. They provide a strong nursing offer to support health needs at home, at education settings and in children's communities. For example, there is wraparound support provided to families when a child or young person is life limited and requires end-of-life support. Children and young people with complex physical and medical health needs receive appropriate assessment and identification of support, as required through the continuing care framework.
- Many disabled children and young people have social workers who know them well and support them effectively to help meet their needs. Social workers in the children with disabilities team work closely with children and young people to ensure that they understand their views and their world. Social workers' assessments demonstrate the voice of the children or young person, their needs and the multi-agency actions required to address these needs. Equally, children and young people receiving early help have practitioners who take time to get to know them and their families. This ensures that assessments accurately reflect the areas in which children and young people need support. Plans are detailed and ensure that there is a coordinated, multi-agency approach to meeting children's needs.
- Children and young people with SEND moving into residential special schools are well prepared. Sensitive transition planning between the local authority and the provider allows the pace of change to be set by the child or young person. This supports them in successfully moving from their home to live in the residential school. There are positive examples of children and young people making strong progress in their social and independence skills as well as their learning while at these special schools. They are well supported to engage with activities and groups within their local communities. Social workers oversee placements to ensure that they are appropriate. They regularly attend annual reviews and are suitably involved in next steps planning to ensure a smooth transition into adulthood.
- Care leavers with SEND have personal advisers (PAs) and adult social workers who know and understand their needs well. There is early involvement of adult services, which helps to ensure that young people's needs continue to be met effectively. Most young people are actively involved in the plans created to support them towards independence according to their individual needs. Most plans are timely and outline both the young person's needs and risks and how these can be met and reduced. This means that young people are well supported as they move into adulthood.
- Leaders demonstrate effective practice in their approach to AP. They ensure that systems are well structured, quality assured and underpinned by a clear local framework. There is a strong offer for children and young people, both in terms of academic and vocational opportunities. Children and young people are supported effectively in order to reintegrate back into mainstream providers, where appropriate.
- Careers guidance, through an impartial careers information, advice and guidance service, through employment forums and through practical work experience

opportunities demonstrate a strong focus on preparing children and young people with SEND for adulthood. There are positive examples of tailored support for careers, specifically for children and young people with SEND, and increasing opportunities for apprenticeships, internships and employment. Children and young people with SEND who are NEET are supported in a personalised and sensitive way to help them back on track with their future next steps.

- The partnership is committed to supporting the improvement of children and young people's outcomes and experiences in a strategic way. Partners demonstrate a well-thought-out approach to SEN Support in schools, through their collaboratively developed strategy called the high-quality inclusive teaching framework. There are many positive examples of multi-agency working to support schools to become increasingly able to meet children and young people's needs effectively.

What does the area partnership need to do better?

- The experiences of some children and young people with SEND remain inconsistent. In some areas, leaders across the partnership have not had full oversight of gaps in services and what that means for children and young people with SEND in Blackburn with Darwen. This, in part, is because health data has only been readily available for all place localities in NHS Lancashire and South Cumbria ICB. This has meant that leaders have not maintained full oversight of key areas of risk, such as the ND pathway for 16- to 25-year-olds and access to specialist and adapted wheelchairs.
- There are examples of where gaps in service exist, and reasonable steps to mitigate these have not been put in place. In the case of the ND pathway for 16- to 25-year-olds, there is no risk assessment. For wheelchair services, the risk assessment is held only by the ICB, rather than the partnership. Where risk has not been mitigated, the plans to make further improvements are not fully developed.
- Pathways for young people aged 16 to 25 with autism, and those aged 18 to 25 with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), are not commissioned in a way that meets need for young people in Blackburn with Darwen. Although there are transformation plans in place for the wider ND pathway across the whole ICB, this is only for the 0 to 16 age group for autism and 0 to 18 age group for ADHD. This has resulted in children and young people waiting too long for access to an initial assessment and diagnosis, and in some cases, not being able to access services at all.
- Children and young people with SEND also wait too long to access a range of other health services. These include occupational therapy, community paediatricians, speech and language therapy services, as well as ND pathways between the ages of 0 to 16 for autism and 0 to 18 for ADHD. They also struggle to access important equipment, such as wheelchair services. These waits impact negatively on some children and young people's experiences and outcomes.
- Many parents and some practitioners are unaware of the support on offer, for example the help available to support social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs. While there is a wide range of support in place for children and young people to access while waiting on ND pathways, there are examples of when this has not always benefited children, young people or their families. This is because signposting

and guidance to this support are not always given at the earliest opportunity. For those children or young people on pathways for autism (aged 16 to 25) and ADHD (aged 18 to 25), there is also support while waiting. However, the support is not widely known. This results in children and young people and their families not benefiting from the large range of support that is currently available.

- Some children, young people and their families do not benefit from a joined-up approach to the way that occupational therapy (OT) services are delivered. Although some aspects of OT services were recommissioned two years ago, partners have not worked together effectively to make sure that this has been well coordinated in a way that meets individual children and young people’s needs.
- The developing PCF and some professionals shared with inspectors that, although they are regularly consulted about changes to services, there are not enough opportunities to be involved in 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) or involved enough in helping develop services in a way that meets need. There are examples of co-production within the partnership, but presently there is no strategic overview or shared understanding of co-production across the partnership at the various levels.
- There is more work to do to strengthen some commissioned services. Examples include avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder (ARFID), sleep intervention, and support for sensory differences.
- There is a lack of clarity across Blackburn with Darwen about the arrangements for confirming a diagnosis of a learning disability. As a result, there is an increased risk that children and young people may not always benefit from the right assessment and support in areas such as annual health checks.
- A few children and young people who need a specialist residential provision have experienced delay in this need being recognised. Inspectors saw examples of social isolation, as well as the child or young person not being able to properly access the educational curriculum, because of their complex learning and SEMH needs not being identified and/or met in previous settings. For some children and young people, they were left in this unsuitable provision for too long.

Areas for improvement

Areas for improvement
Leaders across the partnership should strengthen their governance and oversight so that they are more aware of key gaps in provision, including by developing the quality and accuracy of available data. This is to enable partners to work more closely together to make plans, take timely action, manage risks and measure the impact on the experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND.
The ICB should make and implement clear plans to strengthen commissioning arrangements for the 16 to 25 autism and 18 to 25 ADHD pathways. The ICB should make sure that services are accessible to all young people who need them. This includes timely access to appropriate initial assessments and diagnosis, as well as

strengthening the offer of support to children, young people and their families while waiting.

The ICB should continue to take action to reduce waiting times for some health services. This includes timely access to occupational therapy services; access to suitable wheelchair provision; community paediatricians, speech and language therapy and assessment; and diagnosis of ND needs.

The partnership should improve communication so the wide range of 'while you wait' services is better understood and increasingly accessible to children and young people with SEND in Blackburn with Darwen.

Local area partnership details

Local authority	Integrated care board
Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council	NHS Lancashire and South Cumbria ICB
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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 Children's Services Inspector from the CQC.

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