

Area SEND inspection of Walsall Local Area Partnership

Inspection dates: 8 to 12 December 2025

Dates of previous inspection: 20 to 22 June 2022

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 Quality Care 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

The local area partnership is made up of Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council and the Black Country Integrated Care Board (ICB). They are jointly responsible for the planning and commissioning of education, social care and health provision for children and young people with SEND in Walsall.

The commissioning of health services changed across England in 2022. The Black Country ICB became responsible for the commissioning of health services in Walsall in July 2022. The ICB serves Walsall and three other areas: Wolverhampton, Sandwell and Dudley. Since the last inspection, there has been a change to the executive director of children's services. The current director has been in post since September 2023.

Walsall local area partnership commissions a range of alternative provision (AP). AP provides education for children or young people, including those who cannot attend schools due to social, emotional and mental health and medical needs, or for those who have been, or are at risk of, being permanently excluded from school.

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

Children and young people with SEND in Walsall experience inconsistent support to meet their education, social care and health needs. There is, however, an ambition across the partnership to improve. The partnership has ensured that key roles are filled by staff with the skills and knowledge to fulfil them effectively and drive improvement. For example, leaders have improved the timeliness of EHC needs assessments.

Long waits for some health assessments and services negatively impact on children and young people's needs and they do not always receive the support they need at the right time. This includes dietetics, dysphagia, specialist speech and language therapy and the child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS).

Children and young people report that professionals across health, social care and education seek their views, wishes and opinions. There is evidence that these contributions are beginning to make a positive impact on aspects of service design and delivery, such as the short break offer and the online Local Offer. The voices of children, young people and their families are also reflected in education, health and care (EHC) plans. However, the partnership recognises that these views do not consistently inform the preparation for adulthood (PfA) components of EHC plans, which remains an area requiring some development.

Parents and carers have mixed experiences of the services for their children. An increased focus on clustering services into locality hubs is a positive step which is allowing parents, carers, children and young people with SEND to access a range of services in one place. The opportunity to speak to and receive advice from professionals is supporting those who are waiting too long for health assessments or services. For example, speech and language therapists are embedded in various children's teams, including family hubs, to ensure that children receive prompt advice and guidance without a referral to the speech and language therapy team.

In the early years, children with SEND have their needs identified quickly. Supported by an effective and proactive local authority early years SEND team, settings ensure that staff are increasingly well trained to support children with SEND. For those children with higher levels of need, EHC plans are assessed and completed promptly and within statutory time frames. EHC plans are increasingly in place in time for children to move to their next stages of education.

Schools report that the local approach to SEND is improving, citing an increasing clarity of what services are available and mechanisms to access them. The local authority enjoys positive relationships with school settings and works collaboratively with them to build capacity and improve practice. There is an evident sense of collaboration, 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) and partnership working across the local area partnership to create and maintain positive services for children and young people with SEND.

Children and young people with SEND benefit from a raft of support and guidance for young people with SEND as they prepare for adulthood (PfA). For those young people with SEND in receipt of social care, the transition to adult social care is typically well considered. PfA support for young people with SEND in terms of securing employment, training or further education places is varied and responsive. The partnership enjoys positive relationships with local providers and employers and works with them to offer young people with SEND an increasing breadth of opportunities as they enter adulthood.

Children and young people with SEND take advantage of a range of activities and opportunities in the local area. A varied offer of short breaks and holiday activities for children and young people with SEND are coordinated by the local partnership. Children and young people with SEND typically report feeling valued and visible in the community, but some report that the range of opportunities as they get older decreases. Several young people also told inspectors that they worry about crime in their local areas and that this makes them feel less safe to be out and about independently.

What is the area partnership doing that is effective?

- The local area partnership has undergone significant development since the previous inspection and is determined to do the best for children and young people with SEND. They have brought about a proactive culture of reflection, innovation and improvement. Listening and responding to the voices of children and young people with SEND has become an intrinsic feature of the partnership's work.
- Leaders are gaining an increasingly detailed picture of the needs of children and young people with SEND in the area. The refreshed Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) is a helpful step forward in providing partnership leaders with an overview of need, allowing them to identify strategic direction and plan for services to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND. For example, it highlights the over-representation of some sections of the community within the SEND cohort and identifies the importance of the 'going where the silence is' initiative, which aims to engage with all communities in Walsall.
- The local area improvement priorities have been informed by children and young people with SEND and their families, whose voices and experiences are central to leaders' decisions. Children and young people with SEND who spoke to inspectors stated they feel listened to and heard. FACE, the Parent Carer Forum for Walsall, is a valued strategic partner. Co-production in Walsall is an emerging strength of the local area partnership. For example, parents and carers co-produced the supported waiting offer for families of children and young people waiting for health assessments. They were also partners in the co-production of the local SEND & Alternative Provision Strategy.
- The partnership's oversight of AP is a strength. Leaders have an accurate understanding of the increasing need for places in the local area. They have focused on ensuring that providers are rigorously quality assured so the vulnerable learners who attend are supported in quality settings. The partnership is working to open and oversee more specialist resource bases within schools. These provisions are having a positive impact on children and young people with SEND, who benefit from specialist

help while still participating in mainstream school life, as appropriate.

- The partnership prioritises inclusion. A well-established fair access panel ensures that children awaiting a school place are helped quickly and equitably. It provides comprehensive, bespoke support packages for children and young people who are educated other than at school and works tirelessly to engage and support those who are not in employment, education or training.
- Schools report that the local approach to SEND is improving, citing an increasing clarity regarding what services are available and mechanisms to access them. The local authority enjoys positive relationships with school settings and works collaboratively with them to build capacity and improve practice. There is an evident sense of collaboration, co-production and partnership working across the local area partnership to create and maintain positive services for children and young people with SEND.
- Leaders have been successful at improving the timeliness of EHC plan assessments and the issuing of the plans through improved processes and better engagement with partners. Most children and young people who are undergoing an EHC needs assessment receive a health assessment and health advice within the statutory timeline. The weekly 'Health Gateway' meetings and close oversight from the designated clinical officer have improved the process. Newer plans more accurately reflect the needs of children and young people with SEND and the contribution of professionals from education, health and social care. These more precise plans mean that children and young people with SEND are more likely to get the help they need when they need it.
- Practitioners in social care maintain consistent relationships with the children and young people with SEND who they support. Help is timely, practical and tailored to individual needs, with clear plans that are regularly reviewed and adjusted. Oversight of children in care and for care leavers with SEND is effective. The virtual school also maintains close contact and continues to offer advice and guidance as children transition into adulthood. This means that children and young people with SEND known to social care are supported to develop their strengths and integration in the community as they grow.
- The dynamic support register is well established and used effectively. It is reviewed regularly and allows professionals to coordinate services for children and young people with SEND who are at high risk of admission to hospital.
- Leaders have a clear oversight of children and young people with SEND who are educated other than at school. Support packages are bespoke and responsive to the needs and views of individuals.
- For those young people with SEND who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), a range of innovative engagement strategies are in place. For example, local businesses work alongside the partnership to provide work-based experiences and apprenticeships as well as ensuring that care leavers are guaranteed interviews. There is no tolerance for allowing young people with SEND to become NEET in Walsall.
- New models of practice have prioritised SEND and mean that a range of practitioners

within Walsall, including family help practitioners, specialised SEND school nursing, and the health visiting 0 to 19 service within Walsall, deliver a timely, varied and effective offer. Multi-disciplinary team (MDT) panels, Saturday clinics and co-location in family hubs have strengthened integrated working and early identification of SEND in young children.

What does the area partnership need to do better?

- Leaders know there is more work to do to move from an integrated commissioning model to a truly joint commissioning structure. They are clear that they need to work collaboratively to ensure the most effective use of a finite resource. Although there are positive examples of joint commissioning work, such as the joint commissioning of the SEND information, advice and support service (SENDIASS), there is no joint commissioning strategy in place.
- There has been considerable activity to understand the data that is available across the SEND landscape in Walsall. Although individual services understand their own data, there is no shared SEND data dashboard with agreed key metrics that currently allows leaders to measure the impact of their focused improvement work accurately enough.
- The effective sharing of information across services is a challenge. For instance, in the absence of a single patient record or system, health professionals struggle to access information about children and young people with SEND when they need it. This includes some professionals not having readily available access to EHC plans.
- Children and young people who require essential specialist assessment and treatment for eating and drinking difficulties are waiting too long. Some are experiencing a deterioration in their health while waiting. Leaders have been aware of the risks to children and young people with SEND for some time and are undertaking a harm review of those who have experienced delays.
- Many children and young people requiring specialist speech and language therapy intervention to support them with stammering or speech disorders are waiting too long to access this support. For some, this impacts on aspects of their lives, including social interaction and emotional wellbeing.
- Children and young people with SEND also face long waits to be assessed and receive support from the dietetics service. As a result, some are not getting the timely specialist nutrition advice they need to maintain their health and to thrive.
- Children and young people with a learning disability, and those children in care with SEND, wait too long for CAMHS therapy following an assessment. For some children, this leads to an increase in their mental health difficulties and poorer outcomes.
- Children and young people with SEND experience lengthy waiting times for all neurodevelopmental assessment pathways. There is a support offer for parents and carers of children and young people who are on paediatric waiting lists, including those awaiting an autism or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder assessment. However, a relatively small number of families currently access this offer, and for some, needs are not being fully understood or met while they wait. There is more

work needed to engage with the parents of children and young people with SEND. Some parents told inspectors that their children are not getting the help and support they need from health, education and social care services and that they are not well prepared for their next steps.

- Older children and young people with SEND told inspectors that there are fewer opportunities and events tailored to their needs and expressed concerns that they sometimes feel unsafe out in the community. This is impacting on their social development and their confidence about becoming independent.

Areas for improvement

Areas for improvement
The local area partnership should ensure that there are effective joint commissioning arrangements in place to further support improved partnership working at a strategic level.
Leaders across health should work at pace to put in place robust commissioning arrangements to ensure that there is sufficient clinical capacity to deliver specialist health services effectively, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ dietetics ▪ dysphagia (eating and drinking difficulties) service ▪ CAMHS treatment pathways for children and young people with a learning disability and for those children in care with SEND.
The local area partnership should improve how information is shared between and within services that work with children and young people with SEND to ensure that there is a shared understanding of their education, health and social care needs. This includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ improving information-sharing between and within health services in the absence of a single patient record ▪ all practitioners working with a child or young person having easy access to their EHC plan.

Local area partnership details

Local authority	Integrated care board
Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council	Black Country Integrated Care Board
Colleen Male	David Melbourne
www.walsall.gov.uk	www.blackcountry.icb.nhs.uk
Town Hall, Lichfield Street, Walsall WS1 1TW	Civic Centre, St Peters Square, Wolverhampton WV1 1SH

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 and 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.

Inspection team

Ofsted

Gareth Morgan, Ofsted Lead inspector
Rodica Cobarzan, Ofsted HMI
Karina Kulawik, Ofsted Inspector

Care Quality Commission

Geraldine Bates, CQC Lead inspector
Eva Mannan, 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
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