Area SEND inspection of Stockton-on-Tees Local Area Partnership

Inspection dates: 18 May 2026 to 22 May 2026

Dates of previous inspection: 4 February 2019 to 8 February 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 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

NHS North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (ICB) are responsible for the planning and commissioning of services for children and young people with SEND in Stockton-on-Tees.

Since the previous inspection, there is a new director of children's services (DCS). The DCS has been in post since April 2024.

The local authority commissions 39 alternative provisions (APs) that provide education from the sixth day following a permanent exclusion. It also commissions 4 registered APs and a range of unregistered APs for children and young people who are unable to attend school due to medical needs or who require tailored education packages. Some of these provisions are located outside the Stockton-on-Tees local area. In addition, schools independently commission their own AP.

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 receive inconsistent support across education, health and social care. For example, while some achieve positive outcomes and move successfully to their next steps, too many do not receive the right support at the right time. This limits their progress and long-term outcomes.

Children and young people with SEND are increasingly shaping how services are designed and delivered in the local area. Supported by an active parent carer forum (PCF), their voices are beginning to inform decision-making more consistently. Services are starting to reflect their needs more closely. However, much of this work is recent and is not yet having a beneficial impact.

Children and young people's education, health and care (EHC) plans vary in quality. When EHC plans are effective, they clearly reflect ambitions and needs, meaning children and young people with SEND are supported to make progress. Some EHC plans, however, do not fully capture the child or young person's situation or aspirations. Although professionals from health and social care contribute to assessments and reviews, this input is not always reflected in the final plans, particularly after annual reviews. This can lead to gaps in provision, meaning some children and young people with SEND do not receive the coordinated support they need.

Children and young people with SEND do not consistently have their needs identified early enough across the different phases of education. Some settings are highly supportive and adapt provision well. For example, in the early years, many children benefit from timely identification of need and well-targeted support. In others, there are missed opportunities to identify needs early and remove barriers to learning. When this happens, some children and young people with SEND, particularly those receiving SEN support, become disengaged from education. This can lead to increased absence, suspensions, exclusions or a reluctant move to elective home education.

Children and young people with SEND who attend AP have inconsistent experiences. The local area has increased the number of specialist provisions within mainstream schools. When these placements are well planned, children make positive academic and social progress. However, the quality of support is inconsistent. In some settings, support does not meet children and young people's needs well enough, which limits their ability to move successfully onto their next stage of education or employment.

Health services provide positive support. Jointly commissioned programmes such as 'Stockton Talks' improve speech and language skills, enabling children and young people with SEND to communicate and access learning opportunities. Professionals also guide families while they wait for assessments, helping them to access appropriate advice and support. However, waiting times for neurodevelopmental assessments are too long. These delays increase anxiety and slow access to appropriate support. Leaders recognise the need to better understand and address the impact of these waits.

Across the partnership, many practitioners know children and young people with SEND well and advocate strongly for them. Disabled children benefit from practitioners who ensure their needs are understood and prioritised. Children and young people with SEND in care receive particularly effective support, including timely access to services such as mental health support. The effective collaboration between professionals, including the virtual school, helps ensure their needs are met well.

Children and young people with SEND value opportunities to share their views with leaders across the local area partnership. Those involved in youth forums take pride in shaping services, such as contributing to the independent travel training programme. This helps them build confidence and independence. While some families would welcome more community activities, many children and young people with SEND access bespoke opportunities such as youth clubs and SEND sports teams. These activities successfully support their social development and wellbeing.

What is the area partnership doing that is effective?

- Local area partnership leaders are ambitious to improve outcomes for children and young people with SEND. Their accurate self-evaluation identifies clear areas for improvement and sets out appropriate actions to address them. There is a clear shared vision across the partnership, supported by a coordinated and collaborative approach to improvement.
- Leaders use accurate information about the local area, and the needs of children and young people with SEND to plan and improve services and support well. Services are shaped around these needs. For example, there is currently a positive focus on speech and language development. Close multi-agency working helps ensure support is increasingly joined up and accessible.
- The PCF is involved in several strategic boards and in promoting 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). Through positive professional relationships, the PCF is confident in providing support and challenge, and holding local area leaders to account.
- The local area partnership ensures that parents can access an independent SEND information, advice and support service (SENDIASS). Once engaged with SENDIASS, families of children and young people with SEND receive targeted support that makes a difference to them. For instance, families are signposted to useful support and agencies that help to meet their needs.
- Leaders prioritise capturing the voice of children and young people with SEND. SEND youth forums help young people to build confidence and to influence services, for example through contributing to SEND improvement plans and preparation for adulthood resources.
- The Healthy Child Programme is comprehensively delivered. It includes additional 3- and 4-year-old assessments to improve school readiness and identify emerging needs. Children and young people with SEND can also access an innovative Year 9 holistic health review, delivered in school or at home to improve accessibility, including for those educated at home. This helps to identify emerging needs and these children and young people can be referred to targeted services if needed.

- The 0 to 19 service supports transitions between phases of education effectively. Programmes such as 'Grow Well, Grow Health' and school nurse involvement in 'All Together' sessions help children and young people with SEND and their families successfully prepare for the next stage of education and adulthood.
- Local area partnership investment in 'Stockton-on-Tees Talks' is notably improving speech, language and communication across key stages 1 to 3. The 'Talk to Work' programme further develops the communication skills of young people with SEND through employer-led sessions as part of preparation for adulthood.
- Children and young people with SEND who have sensory needs benefit from a well-coordinated offer. This includes occupational therapy programmes that help parents understand and support their children's sensory needs at home.
- Early help services provide effective, needs-led support through close partnership working. This helps to enable early identification and timely intervention.
- Children in care with SEND benefit from swift access to additional support, including fast-track child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) and therapy. There are effective working relationships between children's social care, education professionals and the virtual school which help to ensure that children in care with SEND are understood and their needs met through effective multi-agency planning.
- Transition planning for children and young people with SEND, who are known to social care, is effective. This means young people typically receive continuous support and services as they move from children's to adult services. However, not all young people with SEND benefit from well-coordinated care. This has impacted negatively on some children's outcomes and experiences.
- All schools are supported by dedicated SEND caseworkers, providing a consistent point of contact and help for schools to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND. In addition, specialist teachers are highly valued. Their input supports school staff to improve their practice, leading to better outcomes for children and young people with SEND.
- Practitioners in pathway development centres assess the social, emotional and academic needs of children and young people with SEND and plan next steps effectively. This enables practitioners to put targeted support in place, helps to reduce suspensions and exclusions and supports their successful transition back into education.
- Early years support is effective and well coordinated. Services, such as those providing teachers of the deaf and speech and language therapists, work together well. The 'early support nursery', a venue and service commissioned by the partnership, enhances the support available to early years providers through outreach and community playgroups.
- The local area partnership's wide professional development offer is highly regarded by schools. High-quality training impacts provision successfully. For example, training in emotionally based school avoidance has led to better rates of attendance for targeted children and young people with SEND.
- There is effective oversight of children and young people with SEND who are at risk of not being in education, employment or training (NEET). Early identification and regular careers support help many young people with SEND move successfully onto appropriate next steps. In addition, an increasing number of

supported internships develops the confidence and employability of young people with SEND, further reducing their risk of becoming NEET.

- The local area partnership ensures the quality of AP is consistently monitored. This includes considering children and young people's progress, attendance and their views. However, inconsistencies remain in the provision which children and young people with SEND receive when they attend AP.

What does the area partnership need to do better?

- EHC plans typically do not reflect children and young people's social care and health needs well enough. For example, while social workers and health practitioners are involved in the EHC plan process, their contributions do not consistently translate into children and young people's final or updated EHC plans. This means that these EHC plans do not accurately describe children and young people's current needs and the support that they require.
- The local area partnership does not ensure that preparation for adulthood is built into EHC plans in a meaningful way. There is not enough ambition reflected in EHC plans and practitioners need further support in understanding how they can help children and young people with SEND meet their goals successfully.
- The aspirations of children and young people with SEND in educational settings, are not always reflected as well as they should be in their EHC plan. Some EHC plans do not contain the necessary up-to-date information needed to provide effective multi-agency support.
- Some parents and carers report concerns about a 'cliff edge' in support when their child transitions from children's services to adult services. This impacts negatively on some young people's experiences and outcomes.
- Social care transitions for young people with SEND have not been identified early enough. While the local area partnership has recognised this weakness, for too many young people there have been delays in identifying needs and planning effectively for their successful transition to adulthood.
- Moves between educational settings, including AP, are inconsistently planned for and implemented. While leaders across educational establishments can explain their own transition processes, there is not a consistently well understood partnership approach to transition for children and young people with SEND. This hinders the success of transition and their long-term outcomes.
- Children and young people with SEND in the local area wait too long for neurodevelopmental assessment and access to community paediatrics. While the partnership promotes a needs-led offer at the point of identification, and suitable recovery plans are in place to address the waits, leaders' understanding of waits is more positive than the lived experience of children and young people with SEND. At times, this leads to some children and young people's needs escalating.
- Following ICB transformation, the criteria for accessing the dynamic support register (DSR) has worsened. Although some of the most vulnerable children with SEND at risk of hospital admission are supported by the DSR, others who are at crisis point and risk of placement breakdown are not consistently considered well enough across the partnership.
- There is limited residential provision close to home for disabled children who need

it. This means some children and young people with SEND are placed away from their families and friendship groups. The local area partnership recognises this as a challenge and it is in the early stages of considering solutions.

- The local area partnership's approach to meeting the needs of children and young people with SEND is not yet consistent across education settings. While parents and carers reported that some schools are highly welcoming and committed to improving outcomes for children and young people with SEND, others said that their child's school does not take enough account of their needs, particularly when they do not have an EHC plan. This leads to too many children and young people with SEND disengaging from school or seeking further, specialist support. Furthermore, this contributes to high rates of suspension and permanent exclusion, particularly for those receiving SEN support.
- Children and young people with SEND who are permanently excluded often wait too long to return to full-time education because there are not enough suitable local places. Consequently, some are placed far from home, which can disrupt their stability, support, experiences and outcomes.

Areas for improvement

Areas for improvement
The local area partnership should ensure that children and young people with SEND are well supported during key transitions, such as moving between education settings, services or into adulthood.
The local area partnership should ensure that children and young people's EHC plans accurately identify their needs and the support that they require, including at key points of transition. EHC plans should consistently include up-to-date advice from all professionals working with the child or young person.
The local area partnership should continue working with schools to embed its vision for improving children and young people's experiences and outcomes, by: • improving consistency in how mainstream schools identify and meet the needs of children and young people with SEND, particularly those receiving SEN support • strengthening support for children and young people with SEND to reduce disengagement from school, suspensions and permanent exclusions.
The local area partnership should reduce waiting times for neurodevelopmental assessment and community paediatricians. In addition, the local area partnership should review its plans for neurodevelopmental services to make sure it understands current waiting times and their impact on children and young people with SEND and their families. They should then update and implement their plans accordingly.

Local area partnership details

Local authority	Integrated care board
Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council	North East and North Cumbria ICB
Majella McCarthy, Director of Children's Services	Samatha Allen, Chief Executive
www.stockton.gov.uk	www.northeastnorthcumbria.nhs.uk
Dunedin House Columbia Drive Stockton-on-Tees TS17 6BJ	Pemberton House Colima Avenue Sunderland Enterprise Park Sunderland SR5 3XB

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: 2 HMI Inspectors from education and social care; a lead Children's Services Inspector from the CQC; and another Children's Services Inspector from the CQC.

Inspection team

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