Area SEND inspection of Knowsley Local Area Partnership

Inspection dates: 29 June to 3 July 2026

Dates of previous inspection: 14 to 18 March 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 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

Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council and NHS Cheshire and Merseyside Integrated Care Board (ICB) are jointly responsible for the planning and commissioning of services for children and young people with SEND in Knowsley.

There have been some changes to the senior leadership of Knowsley's SEND services since the previous inspection. This includes the appointment of a new executive director, children and young people (the statutory director of children's services), a director of children's prevention and integration, a director of education and inclusion and a director of children's social care.

NHS Cheshire and Merseyside ICB are responsible for the commissioning of health services in Knowsley.

The local authority commissions alternative provision (AP) to provide education for children or young people, including those who cannot attend school due to social, emotional and mental health 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 special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) in this area?

Children and young people with SEND have an inconsistent experience of accessing services in Knowsley. Some receive support that does not meet their needs effectively. As a result, they do not achieve the best possible outcomes. This is because the local area partnership has not fully realised its aspirations and ambitions for children and young people with SEND in Knowsley.

Across the partnership, some children and young people with SEND benefit from dedicated practitioners who make a positive difference to their experiences and outcomes. These practitioners understand the individual needs of the children and young people with SEND that they support. They work closely with families and other services to coordinate support that is appropriately matched to children and young people's needs. For example, effective partnership working between public health practitioners, therapists, early help workers, schools and APs helps some children and young people to have their needs identified and supported well.

However, this effective practice is not consistently embedded across the partnership. Some children and young people's needs are not identified accurately or in a timely way. As a result, they can wait too long for appropriate assessments to establish and understand their needs fully. This includes lengthy waits for assessments, including for neurodevelopmental conditions such as autism. These delays mean that some children and young people do not have their needs understood as quickly or as comprehensively as they should. Consequently, the support that they receive is not always informed by a clear understanding of their needs at the earliest opportunity. For some, these delays affect the request for an education, health and care (EHC) needs assessment at the point when statutory assessment would be appropriate.

The quality of EHC plans is variable. Some children, young people and their families do not feel listened to or fully involved in the reviews of their EHC plans. Following annual reviews, updates to EHC plans are sometimes delayed or do not provide enough information, particularly from some health and social care professionals, about the support required to help meet needs. For example, many EHC plans do not include clear and timely information to help children and young people prepare for adulthood and move successfully to the next stage of their lives. As a result, some young people with SEND face uncertainty about how they will access ongoing care and support when moving to adult services. Some children and young people with SEND move successfully between different phases of education, such as from primary to secondary school. However, others, particularly those approaching adulthood or those without an EHC plan, are not well informed about the support available to them or their next steps in their education, employment or training.

Children and young people with SEND report that local area leaders seek and listen to their views. They feel listened to and recognise that their feedback helps to shape some of the services and support available to them. They value being involved in discussions about improvements across the local area. Despite a formal parent carer forum (PCF) not being in place, local area leaders consider the views of parents and carers in decision-making. The partnership is committed to reinstating a PCF promptly. However, other parents and carers report less regular and effective communication.

Some children and young people enjoy taking part in social activities, such as the 'inclusive hub' and 'an hour for others'. However, many expressed a wish for a greater variety of accessible activities. Transport remains a barrier for some children and young people with SEND, further limiting their engagement with opportunities.

What is the area partnership doing that is effective?

- Leaders share a determination to improve outcomes for children and young people with SEND. Recent changes to the leadership structure and governance arrangements have brought stability. Strategic partners have a clear vision and strong sense of direction for the local area.
- Leaders have a clear understanding of the areas that need to improve. For example, they have taken a strategic approach to addressing the long waiting times that families face in accessing neurodevelopmental assessments. Although it is too early to see the full impact of this work, children and young people on the pathway typically benefit from an effective offer of support while they wait. This includes pathway welcome events and remote and in-person support, which inspectors heard are helping to meet children and young people's needs while on the pathway.
- Leaders have an accurate and shared understanding of children and young people's needs in Knowsley. Leaders share information effectively, including through the SEND data dashboard, to help partners identify children and young people with SEND who are at risk of not being in education, employment or training, and those who may have significant periods of absence from school.
- Education providers describe the partnership as supportive and value the contribution of services such as educational psychology and autism outreach. These services help providers to identify and understand the needs of children and young people with SEND more accurately and support the delivery of appropriate provision.
- Effective commissioning arrangements, supported by clear oversight and accountability, have contributed to ongoing service improvement. For example, children and young people with SEND who access AP are well supported to transition to a longer-term educational placement, including a return to mainstream education, when appropriate.
- Some children, young people and their families benefit from coordinated, person-centred health services. Occupational therapy and physiotherapy assessments are a

particular strength. They inform recommendations for children and young people with sensory needs, including those with complex health needs. Speech and language therapists typically provide timely and effective assessments. Children with SEND in the early years benefit from appropriate support for their sensory and speech and language needs. The healthy child programme is delivered comprehensively from birth and supports the effective early identification of children's needs.

- The partnership engages children, young people with SEND and families in decisions about their lives. Personal assistants support care-experienced young people with SEND to make choices and understand their plans. Children in care with SEND contribute to their reviews directly or through their independent reviewing officer.
- Many children and young people with SEND are included in their communities. For example, some older young people with SEND benefit from opportunities to engage with local businesses and community organisations. Through these experiences, they learn about the world of work, develop important life skills and build their independence. As a result, these young people are better prepared for employment and adult life.
- There is a well-established dynamic support register (DSR) in Knowsley. There is effective oversight of children and young people at risk of admission to hospital. Children and young people included in the DSR have their needs met typically well.

What does the area partnership need to do better?

- The local area partnership recognises that children and young people experience significant delays in accessing neurodevelopmental assessments. During these waits, some children and young people's needs increase in complexity and severity. Oversight and risk management arrangements for this group are not consistently effective. As a result, families and practitioners across health, education and social care do not always understand how or when to escalate concerns when needs change or risks increase. Although leaders have developed plans to reduce waiting times, these actions have not had a measurable impact. Access to information, advice and support for children and young people while they wait is too variable. Too often, families must identify and seek out support for themselves.
- Children and young people with SEND do not consistently benefit from effective multi-agency planning and support. Partnership working across health and social care is not sufficiently coordinated. Attendance and contribution from partner agencies at key multi-agency meetings are inconsistent, limiting the effective sharing of information and joint decision-making. As a result, professionals do not always have a comprehensive understanding of children and young people's needs and support is not consistently planned or delivered in a coordinated way. This reduces leaders' ability to maintain effective oversight and can delay the provision of timely and appropriate support.
- Disabled children receiving a statutory social care service experience too many changes in social worker. This disrupts the development of trusted relationships and

leads to delays in planning and decision-making. At times, workforce instability further reduces social workers' ability to assess and respond to risks effectively. Consequently, some of these children and young people do not receive timely interventions and appropriate support when they need it.

- The quality of EHC plans is too variable. EHC plans do not consistently reflect an accurate and comprehensive understanding of children and young people's needs. In many cases, health and social care information is either insufficient or out of date. As a result, outcomes are not always suitably ambitious, and the provision specified does not consistently identify the support required to meet children and young people's needs effectively.
- Some EHC plans are not completed or reviewed in a timely manner to reflect children and young people's changing circumstances and needs. Consequently, EHC plans are not always effective in guiding families and professionals or in securing coordinated support and improved outcomes for children and young people with SEND.
- Preparation for adulthood begins too late for too many young people with SEND. EHC plans rarely focus on preparing children and young people for adulthood sufficiently well. Delays in completing EHC plan annual reviews further limit the ability of practitioners to prepare children and young people for adulthood effectively. For young people with the highest level of needs, and where adult services are involved early, young people receive a well-coordinated and sensitive service and are typically well supported into adulthood. However, children and young people's experiences of preparation for adulthood remain highly variable across the partnership.
- Some children and young people with SEND wait too long for short-break services. Access to short breaks is variable as they are not sufficiently well tailored to meet the specific needs of children and young people with SEND. While referrals are often timely, some children and young people with SEND do not receive the support that they need to ensure that they access appropriate short-breaks provision.
- Leaders do not have sufficient oversight of children and young people with SEND in 52-week residential placements. Consequently, opportunities for early intervention are missed. This hinders these children and young people's outcomes and experiences.
- Some children and young people with SEND who need electronic communication devices wait too long to access the equipment that they need. These delays mean that these children and young people cannot communicate, participate or benefit from support as fully as they should.

Areas for improvement

Areas for improvement
The local area partnership should ensure that children and young people with SEND consistently benefit from well-coordinated partnership working. Leaders should ensure that professionals work together to coordinate planning, have an accurate oversight of current needs and make sure children and young people with SEND get the right help at the right time.
The local area partnership should accelerate its work to reduce the long waits for neurodevelopmental assessment. In addition, it should enhance the support it provides to children and young people and their families across education, health and care while they wait.
Leaders should improve their oversight of the quality, accuracy and timeliness of EHC plans. Specifically, they should ensure that: ▪ effective multi-agency working across the partnership ensures that children and young people's EHC plans include appropriate education, health and social care advice and outline the agreed support that they need to improve outcomes ▪ they update children and young people's EHC plans promptly and accurately after annual reviews.
The local area partnership should improve access to a suitably well-resourced disabled children's service that provides timely, accurate assessment and support, and ongoing oversight to these children.
The local area partnership should improve the short-breaks offer so that children, young people and their families can access a service that meets their needs effectively.
The local area partnership should ensure that children and young people with SEND routinely benefit from a timely and effective preparation for adulthood strategy. They should ensure that preparation for adulthood is routinely included in children and young people's EHC plans and ensure that children, young people and their families are aware of the services that can support them in adulthood.

Local area partnership details

Local authority	Integrated care board
Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council	NHS Cheshire and Merseyside
Mark Mirfin, Executive Director (Children and Young People)	Liz Bishop, Chief Executive Officer
www.knowsley.gov.uk	www.cheshireandmerseyside.nhs.uk
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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: one HMI and an Ofsted Inspector 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

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