

Area SEND inspection of Sunderland Local Area Partnership

Inspection dates: 17 to 21 November 2025

Dates of previous inspection: 21 to 25 June 2021

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 three 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

The commissioning of health services changed across England in 2022. At this time, the responsibility for health services in Sunderland passed to the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (ICB). Sunderland City Council and North East and North Cumbria ICB are jointly responsible for the planning and commissioning of services for children and young people with SEND in Sunderland.

Together for Children (TfC) delivers children's services on behalf of Sunderland City Council. This includes provision for SEND through a local area partnership with the ICB. Since the previous inspection in 2021, there have been several changes to the local area partnership senior leadership team. This includes a new director of children's services, a director of children's social care and a director for education.

TfC commissions a range of alternative provision (AP) for permanently excluded pupils, those identified as close to permanent exclusion and those who cannot attend school because of health needs. There is one local authority-maintained pupil referral unit that provides support for pupils in key stage 1 to key stage 4. A range of AP adds additional capacity for children and young people who need support away from mainstream education. TfC provides a small number of children and young people who are unwell with home tuition or online tuition.

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

Most children and young people with SEND have inconsistent experiences in Sunderland. The local area partnership is committed to improving education, health and social care for children and young people with SEND. However, while improvement in many aspects of the partnership's work is evident, the overall impact on the lived experiences of children and young people is variable.

Children and young people with SEND in Sunderland are valued, visible and included within their communities. The partnership actively attempts to engage with children and young people to help ensure their views inform local decisions and provide insight into their lived experiences to shape local services. The partnership is working to ensure children and young people are more deeply involved in local area decision-making. They are finalising the Sunderland co-production (a way of working where children, families and those that provide the services work together to create a decision or service that works for them all) charter to ensure all stakeholders, including children and young people and their families, have a more meaningful and consistent voice in their local area.

Most children, young people and their families are involved in decisions about the individual support they receive. This includes planning for next steps in education, employment or training and the transition from children's to adults' social care. For example, the partnership works proactively with schools and education providers to ensure children and young people remain engaged in education or training. A growing number of young people go on to supported internships or employment-based training.

The partnership has invested in specialist provision for children and young people with SEND in Sunderland. This includes a purpose-built special school. Children and young people who need time away from mainstream school receive positive experiences in appropriately commissioned AP. An increasing number of school-age children with SEND have their needs met in schools with additional resource bases. This means children and young people with SEND are increasingly supported in their local schools.

Most children and young people with SEND receive effective support to attend school regularly. As a result, the attendance of children and young people with SEND in Sunderland broadly matches national averages. In addition, many primary school-age children who receive SEN support achieve well. They achieve better outcomes than primary school-age children in England with similar needs. However, in contrast, many secondary school-age children with SEND do not achieve as well when compared to national averages for children with similar needs.

Children and young people's education, health and care (EHC) plans are of a variable quality. The voice of the child and family is consistently evident in newly issued EHC plans and the child and young person's needs are more accurately documented. However, health and social care advice and recommendations are too frequently missing from EHC plans and not consistently included in annual reviews, despite the availability of this information.

The early help offer in Sunderland is a strength of the partnership's work. Families with younger children with emerging or assessed SEND needs access welcoming, resourceful family hubs where support is timely and effective. Disabled children's social care needs are accurately identified and assessed promptly. Most disabled children and young people receive appropriate help from social care services. Their voices are central to assessments and planning.

Health services provide a range of tailored support designed to meet children and young people's needs early. However, waiting times for some services, such as mental health and speech and language therapy (SALT), are too long, with delays in assessments for children and young people. Nonetheless, some children and young people receive support while they are waiting for specialist health assessments and some children and young people on waiting lists are tracked and receive professional contact, but this practice is inconsistent.

The partnership is further developing the ordinarily available provision that children and young people should receive in schools and settings. This ongoing work includes children and young people co-producing a new ordinarily available offer to ensure they receive the right support at the right time. This work is under consultation and aims to ensure that all children and young people experience the same opportunities and support.

What is the area partnership doing that is effective?

- The partnership demonstrates strong collaborative practice. For example, the Parent Carer Forum (PCF) is used as an effective strategic partner in local area decision-making. The PCF actively participates in family hubs and school meetings, increasing families' access to SEND services and support. Outreach into family hubs and schools has strengthened engagement and improved communication with parents and carers.
- Educational settings work effectively to share information during transitions between phases. This ensures new education providers understand individual needs and required support. For example, schools collaborate closely with further education providers to implement tailored transition arrangements, including additional visits and taster days. This helps young people with SEND settle into post-16 education well.
- The virtual school is ambitious for children in care with SEND. It provides targeted support at transition points and effectively monitors the progress of children in care with SEND through frequent Personal Education Plan (PEP) reviews. As a result, many children in care with SEND achieve well.
- Commissioning processes are effective and meet the educational needs of children and young people with SEND. The partnership has appropriate quality assurance processes for specialist placements and AP. These processes include an AP directory and due diligence toolkit. Commissioning panels check a placement's safeguarding practices and quality of education effectively.
- Children, young people and families actively shape and review services. However,

engagement with some community groups remains a challenge. To address this, the partnership is introducing a co-production charter to strengthen collaborative working across Sunderland.

- Key workers provide tailored support for children and young people on the Dynamic Support Register (DSR). They agree strategies of support with families and jointly track progress. In addition, family budgets fund activities that promote emotional wellbeing. There has been a reduction in hospital admissions since the DSR's introduction.
- Children receive timely Healthy Child Programme visits and experience specialist support in community and educational settings. For example, to improve accessibility, some SALT interventions are delivered by trained health visitors and within family hubs. Multi-agency panels coordinate SALT referrals to ensure effective support for communication needs despite long waits for the service for some children and young people.
- The partnership provides a range of mental health services to support a variety of needs. For example, the Mental Health in Schools Team and Sunderland counselling practitioners actively support children and young people with mental health needs under the supervision of senior colleagues. This ensures children and young people with SEND receive appropriate support while they wait for targeted intervention.
- Disabled children and their families receive timely intervention and support through early help and disabled children's social care services. Practitioners consider and identify additional vulnerabilities linked to children's disability. They diligently explore family networks to keep children safely within their families wherever possible.
- Early Help services prioritise collaboration with families. For example, parents play a key role in developing and maintaining family hubs. Furthermore, social workers have contributed to a comprehensive SEND support directory for families, developed by parents and carers, that helps them to navigate the local SEND system. In addition, social workers use communication aids, such as words and pictures, to help disabled children understand changes and plans.
- Plans developed through early help and social care are collaborative and support emerging or assessed SEND. Behaviour support practitioners strengthen families' understanding of their child's behaviour and provide plans and strategies to keep children safe at home, in school and in the community. Transitions to new short breaks or care placements are carefully managed. This ensures children are well prepared and supported to settle quickly.
- Commissioning of residential special school placements is strong, with multi-agency oversight that ensures providers deliver high-quality care and education. Accommodation for young people transitioning to adult social care is scoped effectively to match individual needs. Skilled practitioners receive ongoing training and multi-agency learning. This strengthens their ability to engage and support children and young people with SEND.

What does the area partnership need to do better?

- Children, young people and their families have a general lack of understanding of the local offer. Available information is often perceived as generic and insufficiently detailed. Furthermore, current SEND practitioner training does not consistently cover the Sunderland local offer. This leads to misunderstandings and less-effective support when practitioners support families as professionals are less aware of the local offer than they should be.
- Amendments to some children's and young people's EHC plans are not made in a timely way. At times, EHC plans show a final amended date that is earlier than subsequent annual reviews. The lack of updates to a child or young person's EHC plan gives the impression that it has not been updated or reviewed appropriately. As a result, some education settings work from internally updated EHC plans to better reflect the current needs of children and young people.
- For children in care with SEND, EHC plans do not consistently include updated information from virtual school PEP reviews. More generally, information from social care and health is often missing or outdated. In addition, the effectiveness of the annual review processes is inconsistent, with updates to EHC plans too frequently delayed.
- Permanent exclusions for children and young people with SEND in Sunderland remain higher than national averages, with those receiving free school meals being disproportionately affected. Despite inclusion improvement pilots, suspensions and exclusions stubbornly persist, particularly in secondary schools, with notable spikes in suspensions in Years 7 and 8.
- Though educational settings work effectively to share information during transitions, transition support between education phases is inconsistent. For example, some young people receive inconsistent guidance as they progress towards adulthood, further study and employment. This leaves them uncertain about what support and options are available after further education. Furthermore, some leisure activities for children and young people with SEND are not available for young people with SEND aged over 18. This contributes to social isolation for some children and young people.
- Some services are being embedded. For example, the Elective Home Education (EHE) service is developing rapidly. However, existing systems leave some home-educated children with SEND with limited support. Some records show reactive engagement and inconsistent monitoring, with informal family contact insufficiently logged. This undermines the partnership's oversight of children with SEND who are electively home educated.
- Pilot health projects, such as parenting support, have highlighted service gaps. The partnership recognises the need for service transformation in health therapies and primary care with new service specifications and the need for more sustainable contracts to be planned and implemented. Recovery plans clearly set out actions to improve at pace.
- The partnership lacks an integrated dataset with outcome measures across services. Work is underway to co-produce outcome measures. However, there is no consistent

system to evaluate impact or inform commissioning and the development of services.

- Record-keeping systems across health services vary. Some can be cumbersome to use. Some practitioners cannot access certain records and communication from hospitals and primary care providers can be delayed. Mental health teams use different electronic systems, making communication dependent on individuals rather than integrated processes.
- Referrals into core mental health services are restricted to professionals and the process is often misunderstood by families and schools. This leads to inconsistent support and misses opportunities for early intervention. In addition, some referrals to specialist health services are further delayed after initial assessments and when transitioning between services. This causes additional frustration.
- Support for bladder and bowel care is inconsistent with some families facing delays in accessing medication and support. This means that some children and young people experience ongoing difficulties into adolescence.
- Some families describe difficulties accessing short breaks. This includes securing direct payments for personal assistants for their children. In response, the partnership is updating its short break offer, including plans for a dedicated short break children's home and a home for children with complex SEND. The partnership has identified some placement sufficiency challenges. It works creatively to find appropriate care placements. However, some disabled children in care live outside Sunderland due to a lack of suitable local options.

Areas for improvement

Areas for improvement
The local area partnership should ensure practitioners and families are well informed about the local provision to support children and young people with SEND and are supported to develop a stronger understanding of the Sunderland local offer.
The local area partnership should further strengthen the quality and consistency of EHC plans by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ensuring EHC plans accurately reflect each child and young person's current needs by including up-to-date contributions from education, health and social care ▪ improving the timeliness and effectiveness of the annual review process to ensure education, health and care providers have updated EHC plans that represent an individual's most current needs and the support that they require.
The partnership should strengthen the transition support and guidance that children and young people with SEND receive. The partnership should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ strengthen the transition support that children and young people with SEND receive between education phases to reduce the number of permanent exclusions and suspensions by working collaboratively with stakeholders ▪ strengthen the guidance and support young people with SEND receive when preparing for adulthood, and transitioning to further study and employment

- strengthen the consistency of health pathways to ensure children and young people with SEND experience smooth transitions between health services.

The partnership must continue to take action to reduce waiting times and the impact of them across health services. In particular, waiting times for bladder and bowel care, SALT and mental health support. In addition, the partnership should:

- strengthen the tracking and support that children and young people with SEND and their families receive while waiting for health services
- ensure the sustainability of health services with clear service specifications and strong oversight.

Local area partnership details

Local authority	Integrated care board
Sunderland City Council	North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board
Simon Marshall Director of Children's Services and Chief Executive Officer of Together for Children Sunderland	Samantha Allen Chief Executive of the Integrated Care Board
www.togetherforchildren.org.uk	www.northeastnorthcumbria.nhs.uk
Together for Children Bunnyhill Centre Hylton Lane Sunderland SR5 4BW	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: two HMI 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

David Mills, Ofsted HMI, Lead inspector
Sarah Seaman, Ofsted HMI
Jo Warburton, Ofsted HMI

Care Quality Commission

Tessa Valpy, CQC Lead inspector
Eva Mannan, CQC inspector

If you are not happy with the inspection or the report, you can [complain to Ofsted](#).

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, further education and skills, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for looked-after children, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/, write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This publication is available at <http://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/>.

Interested in our work? You can subscribe to our monthly newsletter for more information and updates: <http://eepurl.com/iTrDn>.

Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.gov.uk/ofsted

© Crown copyright 2026