

**CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
3 MARCH 2025**

AN OVERVIEW OF THE LOCAL AREA SEND INSPECTION (NOVEMBER 2024)

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. This report provides an overview of the SEND Inspection Framework, the activity that took place during our inspection in November 2024 and summarises the findings and subsequent actions taken and planned.

Summary

2. Children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) are 'valued, visible and included', inspectors have found. Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission visited to check on services for young people with SEND. Darlington has seen improvements to services for children with SEND since its previous inspections in 2022. The Council and the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (ICB) are jointly responsible for the planning and commissioning of services for children and young people with SEND in Darlington

Recommendation

3. It is recommended that the committee notes the contents of the report and the local partnership's planned response.

Reason

4. The recommendations are supported by the following reason; the Council has statutory requirements set out in the Children and Families Act 2014 together with the guidance in the SEN Code of Practice that was issued alongside the 2014 Act. These provisions include the duty to keep under review the educational provision, training provision and social care provision made in its area for children and young people who have special educational needs or a disability and made outside its area for children and young people for whom it is responsible who have special educational needs or who have a disability (section 27 of the 2014 Act).

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Background Papers

No background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

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Council Plan	The strategy supports the commitments for children and young people-supporting the best start in life, realising potential and raising aspirations.
Addressing inequalities	This strategy sets out our local plan for addressing inequalities faced by young people with special education needs and disabilities (SEND) and ensuring that they can receive access to high quality educational provision and outcomes.
Tackling Climate Change	The effective delivery of this strategy will support the council's Climate Change priorities.
Efficient and effective use of resources	The strategy supports the commitments in the council's Safety Valve Agreement to ensure efficient use of the Designated School Grant High Needs Block.
Health and Wellbeing	Health lifestyles of children and young people is a key component of the SEND strategy.
S17 Crime and Disorder	There are no specific elements of the strategy which address crime and disorder.
Wards Affected	All wards are affected.
Groups Affected	Children, young people families and key stakeholders.
Budget and Policy Framework	2014 Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice.
Key Decision	Yes.
Urgent Decision	No.
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	The effective delivery of the strategy will positively benefit looked after children and care leavers.

MAIN REPORT

Information and Analysis

5. The Area SEND inspection of Darlington Local Area Partnership took place over three weeks in November 2024, with the inspection team being on site between 25 and 29 November 2024. This inspection was conducted under the Area SEND Inspection Framework introduced in January 2023 jointly by a team of Inspectors from Ofsted and Care Quality Commission (CQC) and as such is very much a system wide inspection reflecting the need for a system wide response to SEND.
6. Darlington, as a SEND area partnership, was last inspected in 2022 and at that time was required to produce a Written Statement of Action to address areas of weakness. The focus of the inspection at this time was on Local Areas' ability to meet the requirement to convert 'statements' into Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) as well as whether there were strong joint commissioning arrangements in place.
7. Since that time much has changed within both a local and national context, including the changed health landscape, with the implementation of Integrated Care Boards and

Partnerships (ICBs and ICPs), as well the continued increase in the rise nationally in EHCPs and increased complexity of need including emerging needs post pandemic.

Consequently, the new revised inspection methodology very much reflects some of these changes and has a clear focus on outcomes for children.

8. The purpose of Area SEND inspection is to provide an independent, external evaluation of the effectiveness of the local area partnership's arrangements for children and young people with SEND. Where appropriate, recommend what the local area partnership should do to improve the arrangements.
9. The evaluation schedule used within this inspection considers whether:
 - (a) Children and young people's needs are identified accurately & assessed in a timely & effective way.
 - (b) Children, young people and their families participate in decision-making about their individual plans and support.
 - (c) Children and young people receive the right help at the right time; children and young people are well prepared for their next steps and achieve strong outcomes; children and young people are valued, visible and included in their communities.
10. There are three possible outcomes to the Inspection, and, unlike Social Care and previous School based inspections, these outcomes are not single word outcomes and are intended to be more outcome focused. The possible outcomes are:
 - (a) The local area partnership's SEND arrangements typically lead to positive experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND. The local area partnership is taking action where improvements are needed.
 - (b) The local area partnership's arrangements lead to inconsistent experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND. The local area partnership must work jointly to make improvements.
 - (c) There are widespread and/or systemic failings leading to significant concerns about the experiences and outcomes of children and young people with SEND, which the local area partnership must address urgently.
11. Darlington Local Area Partnership report was published on 4 February 2025 and the Partnership was judged to have outcome (b) which recognised the strengths and the positive work that is making a difference to our children and young people but clearly recognises that there is more to do as 'our arrangements lead to inconsistent experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND'. This outcome accords with our own partnership self-assessment and comprehensive strategic planning is underway to make further improvements – building upon the areas strengths whilst recognising there is more to do. The local area partnership will next be inspected within three years.
12. The report said children and young people with SEND have a voice in Darlington. They are valued, visible and included in their communities. Children, young people and their families are included in decision-making about the individual support plans and types of

support that they receive. There are many positives about the partnership's SEND arrangements and the experiences and outcomes for children for young people with SEND.

13. Inspectors state the local area partnership is committed to improving the education, health and social care services across Darlington which benefit children and young people with SEND. However, inspectors found the partnership's arrangements for some children and young people can lead to inconsistent experiences and outcomes.
14. Some of the areas of strength the report highlighted include:
 - (a) The partnership is ambitious for children and young people with SEND. Leaders work closely together to improve local provision.
 - (b) Children and young people are involved effectively in co-producing the Darlington SEND strategy.
 - (c) The timeliness and quality of children and young people's education, health and care plans are improving.
 - (d) Children, young people and their families receive a comprehensive range of effective support while they are waiting for access to services.
 - (e) The partnership has implemented well-thought-out strategies to support the mental health and emotional well-being needs of children and young people across Darlington
 - (f) Children and young people who are in care, and have SEND, are successfully prepared for adulthood.
 - (g) Disabled children receiving support from Children's Social Care experience smooth transitions to adult social care.
15. However, the report also highlighted areas where the partnership must improve, including:
 - (a) Leaders need to continue to develop how they use data to inform strategic planning.
 - (b) Children and young people wait too long for some therapy services and a diagnosis for autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.
 - (c) There is a lack of a defined process to assess and support children and young people with a learning disability.
 - (d) Some children and young people experience delays in the delivery of some health services, for example when navigating access to home equipment.
 - (e) Improve the quality of information sharing with schools and services.
16. The partnership already recognises and is responding to these challenges. The partnership had developed a new SEND Strategy to be adopted this year and completed a full public

consultation on the strategy in December 2024. The partnership will use the findings of the report to align with and inform the SEND Strategy implementation plan.