

CABINET
6 MAY 2025

SEND STRATEGY 2025-2029

Responsible Cabinet Member -
Councillor Nick Wallis, Children and Young People Portfolio

Responsible Director -
James Stroyan, Executive Director of People

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. This report introduces the SEND Strategy 2025-2029 for Darlington Local Area SEND partnership, which comprises a comprehensive plan to enhance the provision of services for children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). The strategy reflects the outcomes of extensive engagement with stakeholders, including parents, carers, educators, health and social care professionals, and young people themselves. The strategy supports Darlington's Council Plan by promoting social inclusion, enhancing educational outcomes, building a skilled workforce, strengthening community health, and ensuring sustainable development. The strategy aligns with key legislation, including the Children and Families Act 2014, SEND Code of Practice 2015, and Equality Act 2010, ensuring compliance with statutory duties. The SEND Strategy 2025-2029 is an ambitious plan designed to improve the lives of children and young people with SEND in Darlington.

Summary

2. The SEND Strategy establishes our strategic approach to the delivery of SEND services for children and young people in Darlington, ensuring the offer is coordinated and responsive to the needs of our community. The strategy sets out our shared local area vision, principles, and priorities to ensure that partners across the Darlington local area are working together effectively to identify, assess and meet the needs of children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) from birth to the age of 25. The SEND Strategy has been coproduced with partners across the borough, and is fundamental to implementing partners responsibilities under the Children and Families Act 2014. It reflects the ambitions and priorities of the Council Plan and other key strategic documents.

Recommendations

3. It is recommended that :-

- (a) Adopt the SEND Strategy 2025-2029 on behalf of Darlington Borough Council attached at **Appendix 1**.
- (b) Agree the Year 1 action plan to implement the aims of the strategy attached at **Appendix 2**.

Reasons

4. The recommendations are supported by the following reasons :-

- (a) The strategy is produced in the context of the 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).
- (b) Approval of the SEND Strategy contributes to the fulfilment by the Council of these obligations.

James Stroyan
Executive Director of People

Background Papers

No background papers were used in the preparation of this report

Tony Murphy: Extension 5637

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 Dedicated 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	No proposed changes to the budget and policy framework
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. This report introduces the new Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Strategy for Darlington, covering the period from 2025 to 2029. This strategy has been developed to support the local area in responding to the growing and diverse needs of children and young people with SEND across the country. It outlines a comprehensive framework designed to enhance the provision, inclusivity, and outcomes of SEND services addressing five ambitions:
 - (a) Being healthy as possible
 - (b) Having good education, training and opportunities
 - (c) Family, friends and relationships
 - (d) Into adulthood towards independence
 - (e) Darlington - our town, community and environment
6. Implementation of this strategy will:
 - (a) Affirm the commitment of Darlington Borough Council to improving outcomes for children and young people with SEND.

- (b) Ensure work in Darlington aligns with national legislative frameworks and addresses local needs assessments.
 - (c) Support the provision of a clear and actionable roadmap for the development and implementation of SEND services over the next four years.
 - (d) Facilitate the allocation of necessary resources and support for the effective execution of the strategy.
 - (e) Enable ongoing monitoring and evaluation to ensure continuous improvement and accountability in delivering SEND services.
7. Darlington Council is committed to providing high-quality, inclusive educational and support services for children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) reflecting government policy and best practice. The development of the SEND Strategy 2025-2029 builds upon previous work and addresses both longstanding and emerging challenges within the SEND landscape.
 8. The shared vision, *"in Darlington we are committed to working in partnership across our local area to coordinate support, care, and learning for SEND children, young people and their families, so they are able to fulfil their ambitions and to thrive"*, was informed by consultation with children and young people and has been agreed by all the key stakeholders. This vision has informed the SEND strategy and accompanying action plan. This co-ordinated approach to strategy and policy development ensures alignment and better supports the achievement of the overall vision for all children and young people.
 9. In recent years, the Darlington SEND system has shown improvement in meeting statutory duties and delivering SEND services, as highlighted by past inspections from OFSTED and the Care Quality Commission (CQC). The 2022 inspection resulted in a written statement of action, and a subsequent 2024 inspection noted improvements in the SEND system. The 2025 inspection 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.
 10. Inspectors stated 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. These findings underscored the need for a robust, comprehensive strategy to support a co-ordinated approach by the system to addressing gaps and improving outcomes for children and young people with SEND.
 11. Performance indicators and data will be used to monitor and evaluate the successful implementation of the strategy. There are ambitious plans to also evaluate the SEND strategy using an Outcomes Framework for Children and Young People at a pupil level. Officers are currently considering the most effective way of collecting, collating and analysing the data and pathfinder activity will commence in late-2025.

Financial Implications

12. The Local Authority funds services to support special educational needs through a combination of both General Fund and a ring-fenced grant from the Department of Education (known as the High Needs Block (HNB) of Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG)). The HNB is expected to contribute towards the cost of provision & additional resources for pupils & students with SEN to participate in education & learning; whilst the General Fund is expected to cover the cost of delivering the local authority's statutory duties in relation to assessment, annual reviews and strategic planning of SEN. High Needs Block Spend is reported and monitored by Schools Forum. Any changes to the MTFP as a result of the delivery plan will be considered through future MTFP/budget setting.

Legal Implications

13. The strategy aligns with key legislation, including the Children and Families Act 2014, SEND Code of Practice 2015, and Equality Act 2010, ensuring compliance with statutory duties.

Carbon Impact and Climate Change

14. The effective delivery of this strategy will support the council's Climate Change priorities. Specifically, by reducing the need to access specialist provision through the continued development of early intervention models. Specialist out of area provision often requires significantly longer travel to school.

Equalities considerations

15. While this strategy sets the high-level vision and approach, equality impacts for specific initiatives will be addressed within the relevant project-level Equality Impact Assessments. This ensures that equality considerations are effectively integrated throughout implementation.
16. Children and young people with SEND often experience inequalities of access and outcomes across the country. Each of the key priorities aims to address the inequalities experienced by children, young people and families. The core work, in strengthening mainstream provision will enhance the principles of inclusion and providing nurturing environments for all, regardless of their needs.

Consultation

17. Initial consultation on this strategy took place with a range of partners through 2024. The SEND Strategy has been co-produced with key stakeholders including children and young people and parents/carers. In the recent Local Area SEND inspection inspectors noted how children and young people were working with the partnership to co-produce a new SEND strategy to improve the support that they receive. Following cabinet approval in October 2024 a full public consultation was undertaken between 25 October 2024 and 31 December 2024.

Outcome of Consultation

18. The outcomes of the public consultation are summarised in **Appendix 3**. These insights have directly informed the refinements to the strategy and action plan, ensuring it is both ambitious and practical.