

Area SEND inspection of Stoke-on-Trent Local Area Partnership

Inspection dates: 29 January 2024 to 02 February 2024

Date of previous inspection: 11 to 15 July 2016

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 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

Stoke-on-Trent City Council and Staffordshire & Stoke-on-Trent Integrated Care Board (ICB) are jointly responsible for the planning and commissioning services for children and young people with SEND in Stoke-on-Trent.

There have been changes to the senior leadership of Stoke-on-Trent's SEND services since the previous inspection. These include the appointment of a new chief executive officer for Stoke-on-Trent City Council, a new cabinet member for children's services, a new cabinet member for Education, Skills and Anti-Poverty, and a chief executive officer of the ICB. After the last Area SEND inspection, a new Director for Children and Families was appointed in 2022. This post holder then left Stoke-on-Trent in January 2024. Therefore, an interim director of children and families is currently in post, while a permanent replacement is being appointed. The commissioning of health services changed across England in 2022. On 1 July 2022, Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent ICB became responsible for commissioning health services in Stoke-on-Trent.

Stoke-on-Trent City Council commissions a range of alternative provisions (AP) inside and outside the city. This is to provide education for children and young people, including those who cannot attend school due to social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) 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 SEND in this area?

Children and young people with SEND are valued in Stoke-on-Trent, and there is a city-wide determination that they will get the support they need to thrive. However, inconsistencies across the education, health, and social care partnerships negatively impact the experiences and progress of children and young people with SEND. Consequently, the partnership's vision for children and young people with SEND to 'be the best they can be' is not yet achieved.

For some children and young people, their needs are quickly identified and assessed. In those cases, education, health and social care work in partnership with parents to get an accurate understanding of needs and put the right support in place. However, this is only sometimes true for all children and young people with SEND. Some parents and carers told inspectors that they have to fight to get their children's needs identified or assessed. This means life can be unnecessarily hard for some children and young people.

If a child or young person has profound and complex needs, they will likely be well assessed, and the right provision will likely be put in place. In these cases, the child or young person will have had support from health and social care from a very early age. This support also includes access to focused and specialist education support, often in a specialist setting that meets their needs and supports their family. However, the support for pupils with less complex needs needs to be more sufficiently comprehensive and timely.

Some children and young people with SEND in Stoke-on-Trent do not always get the best outcomes from their time in education or training. They achieve lower academic results than children and young people in other areas with similar needs. However, this is an improving picture. In the early years, outcomes are improving rapidly because needs are swiftly identified, and barriers to learning are quickly overcome. This means that children with SEND get a positive start to education and are well prepared for starting school.

If a child or young person accesses a specialist provision, including the local area pupil referral unit (PRU), they will likely have a provision closely matched to their needs. They are more likely to access high-quality employability or independent life skills training and have access to the workplace through internships or apprenticeships. However, for other children and young people, the right support can take too long to happen and, in some cases, only when that child or young person has faced long periods of struggle, upset and, in some cases, long periods away from education.

Some children and young people told inspectors that there are few opportunities to be active in the community. While those known to social care often access a broad range of clubs and support, others have fewer opportunities. Some children and young people told inspectors that local football clubs provide opportunities for some, while others said they rely on parents or carers to find the activities. However, other children and young people said there is little to do and that local green spaces have 'no play equipment or goal posts'. For many, they say, staying at home is their only real option. Consequently,

children and young people with SEND do not access activities in the community as well as they could if there was a broad and well-communicated offer for the local area.

Children and young people attending AP will likely be in a safe provision that aims to meet their needs. However, many stay too long in these provisions and forward plans to reintegrate them into their previous school or prepare them swiftly for the next steps into employment, training, or education could be more robust. Local area leaders are developing new plans and quality oversight for alternative provisions, but these actions are in the early stages of implementation.

What is the area partnership doing that is effective?

- Across the partnership, there is a tenacious commitment to improving outcomes for children and young people with SEND. There is now a rich dialogue about individual children and young people and a drive to understand their needs to implement suitable provisions accurately. The partnership has a clear strategy for future development, and there is strong evidence of co-production in developing this vision.
- Support, advice and guidance for children, young people, and their families are developing strengths. Stoke Special Educational Needs and Disability Information, Advice and Support Service and the Parent Engagement Group in Stoke (PEGIS) are welcomed by families, who recognise that both services have given valuable advice and support at challenging times. The 'community lounges' are a positive development for advising and supporting young people with SEND in their local communities.
- The local partnership's work with PEGIS has increased parents', carers', and families' voices at the strategic level. Inspectors heard from parents about the natural desire of local area partnership leaders to engage with families in Stoke.
- Stoke benefits from a full-time designated clinical officer in post, with further funding to provide for a lead for SEND providers; this has supported increased working with the local authority and increased the visibility of health practitioners at a strategic partnership level. Health services are increasingly determined to make the necessary changes for children, young people, and their families. For example, the 0-19 public health service has been redesigned since 2021 and provides an integrated model of care and support with the local authority early help and education services. This means they support health, well-being and development and children being ready to learn.
- Children and young people with speech, language and communication needs receive an appropriate assessment and identification of needs. The therapy team has a pre-referral pathway that ensures referrals into the service are accurate and that children are offered some support from professionals they are familiar with before this, such as the Stoke Speaks Out offer.
- Some children receive needs-led support while waiting for a diagnosis of autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The Discovery Group, which offers early identification of needs, including autism, in the early years, is a family-centred holistic approach in a setting that allows professionals to see a child in a more natural

environment like a nursery.

- The Dynamic Support Register is well-established in Stoke-on-Trent, bringing together the services that help children, young people, and adults with SEND.
- The Children with Disabilities team strongly supports children and young people with complex needs. Children's, young people's and parents' voices are gained and included in detailed assessments. These lead to comprehensive multi-agency plans that, through regular review, reduce risk and support the needs of most children within their families.
- For those with the most complex needs, there is a broad offer for post-16 provision. Partnerships with local colleges have developed opportunities for supported internships at a local hospital or community-based learning at care homes. Young people known to social care are well supported in transitioning to adulthood and finding their place in the local community.

What does the area partnership need to do better?

- Parents often reach a crisis point before services assess their children's needs. Some felt their voices were not heard early enough to make the most significant difference to their children. Some children and young people face periods of school suspension or permanent exclusion before getting the help they need. Arrangements and meetings for early help are not always well attended by those services that could make the most significant difference.
- The local area partnership leaders have identified and implemented systems to hear children's and young people's voices in their improvement plans. Consequently, they clearly understand what children and young people want in the local area. However, this is not always the case for individual children and young people with their provision. Too often, practitioners' and parents' views, rather than the young person's voice, will dictate what the provision will look like, especially when considering what to do when they leave school or college.
- There is too much variability in the quality and timeliness of education, health and care (EHC) plans and review processes. Needs are not always clearly identified, or provision is not clearly articulated. Last year, completed annual reviews were not received by the local authority within the timescale for a third of all plans. This means that children and young people do not have their continuing and developing needs considered by the local authority promptly and effectively. Some therapists are notified of annual reviews either too late or not at all, impacting on their ability to contribute.
- The oversight of children in residential settings outside the area is variable. For some children, neither the commissioning team nor the social care overview is robust enough to ensure children's needs are met. This means that some children's needs are not recognised or met.
- Children and young people with SEND in Stoke-on-Trent do not yet access enough opportunities to be active and visible in their local communities. Parents told us that few inclusive activities exist for children and young people with SEND in Stoke. The

local offer identifies a series of opportunities such as holiday swimming, bowling, day trips and play schemes, but parents say that they often do not know if these will be appropriate for their children.

- Children and young people who may require both an autism and ADHD assessment do not benefit from joint oversight by assessment teams. There is no opportunity to dual-track referrals or ensure that they can transition between or across the pathways if required, as they are entirely independent pathways.
- For young people with SEND who are over 18, there is currently no joined-up approach, including the police, to reduce the risk of criminal exploitation. Work is being developed to develop risk reduction systems for those over 18, to match the strength in systems for children and young people with SEND who are younger than 18.
- Recently, the number of permanent exclusions of children and young people with SEND in mainstream primary and secondary schools has risen. The local partnership is working tirelessly, through fair access protocols, to ensure that these children and young people are quickly integrated with support into a new setting. However, the increased number of exclusions and the increased prevalence of SEMH need has put considerable pressure on systems in Stoke-on-Trent, including education provision, health services and social care support in some cases.
- Children and young people with SEND in Stoke-on-Trent attend their educational settings less frequently than other children and young people with SEND nationally. Over 40% of all children or young people with EHC plans in Stoke-on-Trent are defined as being persistently absent, which means they miss 10% or more education across the academic year for whatever reason.
- The commissioning and oversight of AP have recently been reviewed, and essential changes have been made. Over the last year, area leaders have ensured that children and young people are not at risk of harm when attending these provisions. However, quality assurance systems are in the early stages, meaning that the partnership cannot currently ensure that all children and young people in AP receive high-quality provision that meets their specific needs and prepares them for the next steps into education, training or employment.

Areas for improvement
The local partnership should further improve the timeliness of the identification, assessment, and implementation of support to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND.
The local partnership should continue to work to improve the visibility and engagement of children and young people with SEND within their communities while in education and their broader life experiences.

The local partnership should continue to work to develop the timeliness and quality of EHC plans so they always accurately identify needs and clearly articulate the provision needed for the child and young person.

The local partnership should continue to develop its systems and processes to ensure that the voice of children and young people with SEND is heard and acted upon at an individual and strategic level.

The local partnership should continue to improve the oversight of children and young people attending and quality assurance of alternative provisions and out-of-county placements, including residential settings.

Local area partnership details

Local authority	Integrated care board
City of Stoke-on-Trent	Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Integrated Care Board
Simon White Interim Director of Children and Families	Peter Axon Chief Executive Officer of the ICB
www.stoke.gov.uk	staffsstoke.icb.nhs.uk
Civic Centre, Glebe Street, Stoke-on-Trent ST4 1HH	Stafford Education & Enterprise Park, Weston Road, Stafford ST18 0BF

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 and a team Children's Services Inspector from the CQC.

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