Area SEND inspection of Kent Local Area Partnership

Inspection dates: 6 July 2026 to 10 July 2026

Dates of previous inspection: 27 September 2022 to 29 September 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

Kent County Council and the NHS Kent and Medway Integrated Care Board (ICB) are responsible for planning and commissioning services to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND in Kent, as part of the Kent local area partnership. The partnership oversees the commissioning of local education, social care and health provision for children and young people with SEND. The commissioning of health services changed across England in 2022.

Kent local area partnership commissions alternative provision (AP) for children and young people with SEND. AP provides education for children or young people, including those who cannot attend schools due to social, emotional and mental health and medical needs, or for those who have been, or are at risk of being, permanently excluded from school. Some use of AP is also commissioned by schools.

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 in Kent have varied experiences. While many receive support that helps them make progress and participate in education and community life, this is not the experience of other children and young people with SEND. Some receive timely, well-coordinated support, while others face delays in assessment across education, health and care, uncertainty about support arrangements and difficulties accessing help. As a result, children with similar needs can have very different experiences depending on their age, locality and the services available to them. For

some families, securing appropriate support remains a lengthy and stressful process, contributing to continued dissatisfaction, anxiety and reduced confidence in local services.

Some children and young people with SEND benefit from effective approaches to identify their needs in early years settings, schools and services. They benefit from practitioners who are well trained and confident in recognising emerging needs and implementing support. Families also have access to a growing range of preventative and needs-led services designed to provide support before difficulties escalate. However, these strengths are not experienced consistently well by children, young people and their families across Kent. Some children with SEND, such as those who have been in the SEND system for longer, experience delays before their needs are fully understood and effective support is put in place.

Too many children and young people continue to wait a significant length of time for specialist neurodevelopmental assessments. These delays mean that some children continue to experience challenges at home, in school and in their communities for longer than necessary before appropriate support is available. More children and young people with SEND are receiving support based on their identified needs rather than waiting for a formal diagnosis, helping some access support earlier. However, this is not the consistent experience of children and young people with SEND across Kent. Access to support while awaiting assessment is inconsistent, meaning that children and young people with similar needs can receive different levels of help depending on their age and where they live.

Some children and young people with SEND benefit from thorough assessment and planning processes that bring together information from education, health and social care to develop a comprehensive understanding of their needs and circumstances. Nevertheless, delays across services mean that, for some, assessments, reviews and amendments are not completed in a timely way. As a result, some children and young people's education, health and care (EHC) plans do not accurately reflect their current needs and circumstances. Social care assessments are generally effective in capturing children's views, wishes and lived experiences, while considering the wider family context appropriately.

Children and young people with SEND have uneven educational experiences and outcomes across the county. While many children and young people with SEND attend schools and participate fully, attend regularly and achieve positive outcomes, some experience prolonged periods of disrupted education and non-attendance. Too many remain on part-time timetables for extended periods, experience exclusion or move into AP. Some children and young people with SEND arrive at AP only after their needs have escalated to crisis point before effective intervention is established.

Effective multi-agency working helps an increasing number of children and young people with SEND access services, remain engaged in education and achieve better outcomes. Some families describe coordinated support from professionals who know children well. However, a number of parents continue to report frustration with communication, decision-making and access to support. Some feel they must repeatedly explain their

circumstances and advocate persistently to secure help, leading to uncertainty about available support and next steps.

Access to opportunities that promote participation, independence and preparation for adulthood is not equitable across Kent. Some children and young people with SEND have limited opportunities to participate in their communities, develop friendships and prepare for adulthood. However, others benefit from many helpful community activities, supported internships, employment opportunities and effective transition support that help them develop confidence, independence and a greater sense of belonging within their communities.

Overall, children and young people with SEND increasingly benefit from practitioners who are committed to understanding their needs and responding at the earliest opportunity. There are growing examples of collaborative, needs-led support across education, health and social care. However, these improvements are not experienced consistently by children with SEND and their families across Kent. Variation in access to services, delays in assessment pathways, weaknesses in planning and communication and uneven educational experiences mean that children and young people with SEND do not always receive the right help at the right time. Consequently, experiences and outcomes remain too dependent on where in Kent children and young people with SEND live and service availability rather than need alone.

What is the area partnership doing that is effective?

- Leaders across education, health and social care demonstrate a shared ambition for children and young people with SEND. Together, they are taking steps to address the significant historical failings which are still present within the system. SEND is increasingly embedded across strategic and operational leadership, helping to promote a culture of inclusion and shared responsibility across the partnership.
- Leaders have established a collaborative partnership culture and use challenge and support to drive improvement across the local SEND system. Governance arrangements demonstrate a commitment to learning from previous weaknesses and improving services for children and young people with SEND.
- The quality and timeliness of newer EHC plans is typically effective. Newer EHC plans generally reflect children and young people's views, aspirations and individual circumstances well. Families reported being closely involved in the EHC plan assessment process.
- The partnership is developing a more integrated and needs-led approach to assessment and support. Their investment in workforce development, specialist provision and service redesign is reducing reliance on diagnosis as the gateway to support. Countywide rollout of initiatives such as the 'This is Me' neurodiversity pilot, which provides early support, advice and tailored interventions based on identified needs rather than a formal diagnosis, demonstrates this commitment
- Leaders use operational data, partner intelligence, commissioning information and children, young people with SEND and their families' experiences well to strengthen

their understanding of local need. Awareness of geographical variation across Kent is increasingly informing service planning and development.

- Leaders have developed a range of opportunities to engage children and young people with SEND and their families. Partnership staff have adapted their approaches to overcome barriers to participation, such as establishing drop-in facilities at family hubs and providing SEND road shows. Leaders have used feedback to inform service improvements, including developments in mental health services and schools.
- Effective multi-agency working is evident across several services. Open transparent working relationships with children, young people with SEND and their families are effective within social care, specialist settings, alternative provision and services supporting young people who are not in education, employment or training.
- Leaders' commissioning arrangements are becoming more strategic and increasingly reflect partnership priorities around inclusion, early intervention and sufficiency across education, health and social care. Recent service redesign demonstrates effective collaboration between partners and improved quality assurance arrangements.
- Leaders' arrangements for children and young people with SEND placed in residential schools and out-of-area placements are effective. Joint working between education, health and care partners supports appropriate placement decisions, ongoing oversight and regular review of children's progress and outcomes.
- Leaders use quality assurance activity, thematic reviews and partnership working with schools to maintain oversight of AP. This has supported the development of local initiatives and primary intervention pathways, which is supporting children and young people with SEND to remain in education.
- The dynamic support register (DSR) is a strength. Leaders use the DSR proactively to identify children and young people at risk of hospital admission or placement breakdown. Multi-agency professionals work collaboratively to coordinate support and reduce risk, improving these children and young people's outcomes and experiences.
- Workforce development is an emerging strength. Increased access to training, specialist advice and professional development is contributing to more confident practice and supporting effective multi-agency working across the partnership.

What does the area partnership need to do better?

- Leaders across the partnership do not ensure that children with similar needs receive similar levels of support, regardless of where they live or which services they use. There is too much geographical variation in support and practice across education, health and care services. This means that children and young people with similar needs continue to have different experiences depending on where they live in Kent.
- Leaders do not have a sufficiently strong understanding of the experiences and outcomes of some groups of children and young people with SEND. For example, the oversight of those on part-time timetables or experiencing disrupted education, and those attending AP, is not robust enough. Consequently, some children's needs and experiences are not identified or understood well enough. This limits leaders' ability

to plan services effectively, measure their impact and direct resources where they are most needed.

- Leaders across the partnership do not ensure that children and young people with SEND, and their families, are consistently involved in coproduction (a way of working where children, families and those that provide the services work together to create a decision or a service that works for them all). Families report mixed experiences of being listened to and involved. This results in them being unclear how their views influence decisions and service improvements.
- Leaders across the partnership do not ensure that communication with children and young people with SEND, families and providers is sufficiently clear, consistent and transparent. Consequently, some families do not understand how decisions are made, why support is agreed or declined, what support is available or how to access it. While information is available, many schools and settings remain unclear about recent changes, decision-making processes, commissioning arrangements and funding updates. Furthermore, information is not always shared effectively between services. This can delay support, create duplication and mean that families have to repeat the same information to different professionals. As a result, families' confidence in the system is reduced and providers do not consistently have the information they need to support children and young people with SEND effectively.
- Leaders across education, health and care do not ensure that children and young people with SEND consistently receive timely and appropriate support. Delays in assessment, access to services and placement decisions mean that some children and young people's needs worsen before help is available. Some children and young people with SEND also spend too long in hospital because appropriate community support and placements are not in place. This reduces the effectiveness of support and adversely affects their experiences and outcomes.
- Too many EHC plans and annual reviews are not completed or updated in a timely manner. As a result, EHC plans do not consistently reflect children and young people's current needs, circumstances and required provision. This means that leaders, practitioners and providers cannot always rely on EHC plans to make informed decisions about support, placements and service delivery. The quality and accuracy of EHC plans are further undermined by inconsistencies in professional advice, recommendations and recorded provision. Consequently, some children and young people with SEND are at increased risk of receiving support that is not aligned to their current needs or being placed in settings that are not best suited to helping them to achieve the best possible outcomes. Older EHC plans that have not been reviewed or amended for some time exacerbate these issues, limiting leaders' understanding of need and reducing their ability to plan and commission services effectively.
- Preparation for adulthood is not consistently well planned for most young people with SEND, particularly those without an EHC plan. Post-16 pathways, transition planning and access to employment, training and community opportunities is not consistent for young people with SEND, particularly those receiving SEN support in school.
- Workforce capacity remains uneven across some services and areas of Kent. This creates inequitable access to specialist expertise and support for children and young

people with SEND. As a result, the timeliness and availability of support varies across the local area, leading to differences in children and young people's experiences and outcomes.

Areas for improvement

Areas for improvement
Leaders across the partnership should strengthen the use of data, monitoring, quality assurance and evaluation to ensure that strategic decisions are informed by robust intelligence and lead to improved outcomes for children and young people with SEND. They should: • improve the quality, consistency and use of data to inform strategic planning, commissioning decisions, sufficiency planning and waiting list management; • strengthen oversight of children and young people receiving part-time timetables, AP or not accessing full-time education; • ensure better information-sharing and quality assurance to inform commissioning, placement planning and future sufficiency arrangements and allocation of resources.
Leaders across education, health and care should improve the quality, timeliness and oversight of EHC plans, including the annual review process.
Leaders across the partnership should strengthen communication, co-production, transparency and information-sharing across services, with children, young people, families and providers to ensure that services are developed collaboratively, decisions are understood and support is coordinated effectively across the partnership.
Leaders across the partnership should improve consistency of support and address gaps in provision and sufficiency. They should: • address delays in assessment, provision and placement decisions so that children receive help before needs escalate; • address gaps in early intervention, specialist provision and AP to ensure sufficient high-quality support is available at the earliest opportunity; • reduce variation in frontline practice, specialist support and multi-agency working across the county.
Leaders should further strengthen preparation for adulthood and post-16 pathways by ensuring that planning starts early, transitions to adult services are well coordinated and young people with SEND have access to appropriate education, employment, training and community opportunities that support positive outcomes.
Leaders should ensure that children and young people with SEND and their families experience a more equitable offer across Kent by reducing geographical variation in the access to services, support and opportunities.

Local area partnership details

Local authority	Integrated care board
Kent County Council	Kent and Medway ICB
Christine McInnes, Corporate Director Children, Young People and Education	Adam Doyle, Chief Executive Officer
www.kent.gov.uk	www.kentandmedway.icb.nhs.uk
County Hall, Maidstone, Kent ME14 1XQ	NHS Kent and Medway, 2nd floor, Gail House, Lower Stone Street, Maidstone ME15 6NB

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 two Children's Services Inspectors from the CQC.

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