

PLYMOUTH SEND IMPROVEMENT

Progress Report October 2025



The SEND Improvement Journey and Inspection Readiness

The Local Area Partnership is deeply ambitious for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and determined to ensure all our children and young people are well supported and have strong outcomes and experience good lives.

Fuelled by this ambition and by our ongoing preparation for the upcoming Ofsted monitoring inspection, the Partnership has focused intensively on strengthening monitoring and evaluation processes, updating our self-evaluation framework, writing impact statements and compiling a comprehensive bank of evidence to demonstrate progress since 2023.

The June 2023 the Ofsted SEND Inspection of Plymouth identified widespread and systemic failings in the Local Area Partnership's support for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities, requiring urgent action through a priority improvement plan. The Partnership has responded to this urgency, with the wellbeing of children and young people with SEND at the heart of all we do.

The latest iteration of the delivery plan for SEND reflects the Local Area Partnership's ambition and aspiration to embed excellent practices across all areas, aiming for the best possible outcomes for children and young people. Fortnightly inspection readiness workshops have provided a valuable platform for the entire Partnership to collaborate, share progress and ensure collective preparedness for the inspection visit, across leaders and practitioners.

Since the Inspection in June 2023, Strong Governance arrangements have been put in place across the SEND Local Area Partnership. An independently chaired SEND Improvement Board is in place that meets 6 weekly, an internal Strategic Leadership Board, chaired by the Director of Children's Services, meets monthly and operational groups are in place to drive forward the delivery plan. These groups are well represented at the right level of seniority from across the Partnership, including the valuable contribution from our Parent Carer Forum (PPCV).

We have listened carefully and responded to the voices and experiences of children and young people, including through our young people's group 'Youth Ascends' and our 'Young Safeguarders'. This has taken place through direct engagement with young people in our boards, embedding of the "Ten Wishes" and using these as a reference and checking point for our work. This has been instrumental in designing our services across the partnership. For example, we included young people and families in the SEND Critical Review January 2025, with a focus on the voices of Primary School children and created the young people's Equal, Kind and Safe film, which has been used with partners to enhance inclusion.

The Department for Education (DfE) six-month stocktake, held on 22nd September, offered an opportunity to present and test our opening inspection presentation and review the impact statements in detail.

Feedback from Department for Education (DfE) and health partnership advisers confirmed that good progress has been made since the last inspection. They commended the strength of the partnership's collaborative efforts, which have exceeded the original priority areas outlined by Ofsted and CQC inspectors in June 2023. During the Stocktake, support was offered to strengthen our work even further by evidencing specific activities and outcomes more clearly.

We now await the written report following the Stocktake to ensure we have embedded every element of their evaluation into our preparation, evidence bank and SEND delivery plan.

National Recognition for Plymouth

Over the past 18 months, Plymouth's improvement work in SEND has gained national recognition, reflecting the strength and innovation of the local area partnership. The Head of SEND has delivered seminars to national audiences on the co-production of the Ordinarily Available Provision, which has led to other local areas seeking support and guidance from Plymouth.

The partnership's graduated approach, showcased at www.plymouthgati.co.uk, has been shortlisted for the NASEN SEND Resource of the Year 2025, alongside a second shortlist for outstanding work in Supported Internships. These accolades build on previous recognition, including Skills Awards for Supported Internships and a Pearson Teaching Award, further highlighting the impact of Plymouth's inclusive education strategies.

At the outset of the inspection journey, Plymouth was encouraged to connect with national partners. This has been successfully achieved through collaborative work with the Department for Education (DfE), the Council for Disabled Children, and the RISE Partnership, significantly enhancing Plymouth's national profile. These efforts have firmly "put Plymouth on the map" as a leader in SEND innovation and partnership working.

Targeted Inclusion and Graduated Approach Developments

The graduated approach is a framework outlined in the SEND Code of Practice (DfE 2015) used by schools and early years settings in England to support children with SEND. It ensures that support is tailored, monitored and adjusted as needed.

Significant improvements have been made in Plymouth's targeted approach to inclusion, as part of the continued development of the graduated response. Currently, 30 schools are actively implementing an alternative curriculum pathway for children and young people without an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), supporting approximately 300 pupils. This provision is being closely monitored to assess its impact.

The initial pilot, launched in April across five schools, has demonstrated positive outcomes, including increased engagement, improved attendance, and strong satisfaction from families.

The expansion of special school outreach (whereby our specialist teaching expertise is shared by our practitioners from our special schools in the city) has been a notable strength, with high levels of engagement across the city. This initiative is successfully upskilling mainstream staff and enhancing inclusive practice.

The ambition of the Vulnerable Pupils Panel (VPP) is to ensure that children and young people have equality of access to high quality mainstream education and have the same opportunities to achieve and succeed through all their steps in education and effectively prepare them for adulthood, whatever their starting point.

The VPP is a genuine partnership which ensures that children and young people have access to available support that they need, at a time they need it. The core principle of the partnership is one of inclusion, acting in consultation to support the local area to develop policy, practice, and provision. The partnership has oversight of arrangements that support access to education and support, minimising pupil movement across settings through early help.

The recent DfE stocktake commended Plymouth’s multi-agency collaboration, particularly through panels designed to provide early, targeted support. The Vulnerable Pupil Panel is a key example, supporting children at risk of exclusion. Of the 15 children referred between November 2023 and July 2025, only one has been permanently excluded.

School Leader Testimonial: Impact of the Vulnerable Pupil Panel (VPP):

As we approach the start of another school year (2025–2026), I want to express our sincere gratitude on behalf of the school for the invaluable support we have received from Plymouth City Council’s Vulnerable Pupil Panel throughout the last academic year (2024–2025).

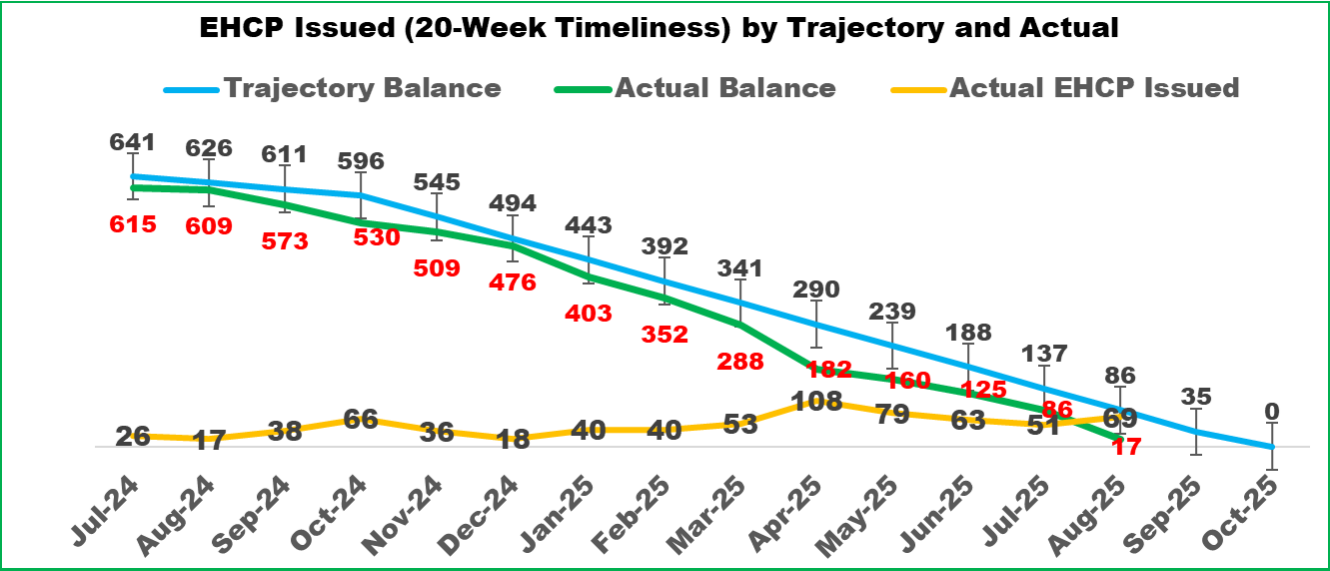
The impact on our pupils has been tangible. Children who were at risk of disengagement or exclusion are now supported through timely, tailored provision. As a school, we feel empowered, knowing we are not battling the system alone but working alongside colleagues who share responsibility for securing outcomes. Parents, too, have voiced their relief that their child’s case is being actively moved forward rather than left in limbo.

In short, the Vulnerable Pupil Panel has provided a vital lifeline at the moments we have needed it most. It has strengthened our ability as a school to respond swiftly to need, restored parental confidence in the process, and most importantly, made a real difference to the educational journey of our vulnerable pupils. We commend Plymouth City Council for its leadership in establishing and embedding the Panel. It is a shining example of how effective local partnership working can drive positive change for children and families.

Education, Health and Care Plan Statutory Timescales

As of the end of August 2025, a total of 3,404 children and young people in Plymouth have an active Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). Since the beginning of the current academic year in September 2024, 661 EHCPs have been finalised. This volume of completed plans has been acknowledged by the Department for Education (DfE) adviser as a significant achievement, reflecting substantial improvements in Plymouth’s EHCP processes to reduce the number of out of time plans at the time of June 2024.

The successful production and issuing of these plans has led to a marked reduction in the number of overdue cases within the previously identified backlog. This progress is visually represented in the graph below.



Sixty-nine final EHCPs were issued in August having received all amendments from settings and families. This represents an increase compared to an average of 40 plans per month being issued for this academic year. 10.1% plans were issued within the 20-week timescale which is demonstrating that now the out of time plans have been reduced, the team are able to improve on the 20-week timescales. This was the prediction at the start of our journey and one that we are determined to improve upon.

The SEND service continued its AI trial across August and into September to support EHCP drafting. Following positive outcomes, an extended trial has been launched, making the software available to all colleagues to monitor its impact on plan quality.

Management information system updates are ongoing to ensure accurate records and data, with a continued focus on preparing our data for the forthcoming monitoring inspection.

Quality Assurance (QA)

Integrated QA processes remain in place across all panels. Amended EHCPs are now fully quality assured, with individual feedback provided. While quality consistency is a continued focus, the Decision to Issue Panel process is well embedded, and staff are encouraged to shadow panels to strengthen understanding. The June quality assurance report has been developed into a wider action plan presented to the SEND Improvement Board in September. The new quality assurance software, Invision 360, was launched in August to support our reviews and learning, with access now available for staff.

Annual reviews

While some annual reviews remain overdue due to the ongoing recovery of cases not completed over an extended period, all newly received plans are now being actioned in accordance with statutory requirements. Each school has been assigned a dedicated reviewing officer, and the review processes have been comprehensively evaluated and relaunched to ensure clear, positive pathways for all children and young people.

Risks and Mitigation

The SEND team is now operating in real time, responding promptly to incoming correspondence and casework. However, rising demand for services continues to present a significant risk. To mitigate this, performance data and service inboxes are monitored closely to identify emerging pressures and respond proactively.

Cultural transformation within the team is being carefully managed through the co-production of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) across all areas of SEND delivery. These SOPs are designed to promote consistency, improve service standards, and provide a clear framework for performance management, support, and challenge.

Delays in receiving Educational Psychology (EP) advice continues to pose a risk to the timeliness of EHCPs. This is reflective of a national picture in shortage of educational psychology advice. To address this, a business case has been submitted to secure additional EP resources, including the recruitment of Assistant Educational Psychologists as part of a 'grow our own' workforce development strategy. This approach aims to build sustainable capacity within the EP team and support improved alignment with the pace of EHCP drafting and issuance.

Sustaining positive communication

The newly implemented SEND duty system continues to demonstrate strong performance and impact. The team is now effectively managing incoming telephone enquiries via the helpline, responding to queries received through general inboxes, and maintaining core responsibilities related to individual children and young people. As of July 2025, 98% of calls to the duty line are being answered—an impressive improvement from the 50% response rate and over 100 abandoned calls per week recorded at the beginning of the year.

Positive feedback from families reflects the value of this enhanced responsiveness. One parent shared: *"I just wanted to quickly say thank you again for calling and just listening—it was very appreciated and just what was needed. I do really appreciate all you guys do in the background."*

Family engagement continues to be a priority. The service has maintained six-weekly face-to-face and online partnership forums through the Plymouth Parent Carer Voice. In response to family feedback, a new programme of fortnightly themed sessions has been introduced, delivered by partners across services. These sessions cover a broad range of topics identified by families as priorities, further strengthening collaboration and transparency.

Support whilst waiting for services across the partnership

The Local Area Partnership have agreed commitments to children and young people to “work together to support you when you are waiting for the care you need, make sure we listen and understand your experiences better and respond in a timely way to your changing needs”.

Partners have listened to children and young people and strengthened our early help support through our waiting well offer. Together across health, education and social care we have developed the following support offers and resources for families and CYP whilst they wait:

- Health Waiting Well resource co-designed with children and young people. Resource on Local Offer
- Neurodiversity navigators support and helpline
- MyHealth Devon Neurodiversity Resource hub
- Mental Health Support Teams in schools
- LSW and UHP have developed their waiting well resources for CYP and parents/carers.
- Early Help Team for SLCN
- Family Hubs
- Families First call line
- Plymouth GATI (Graduated Approach to Inclusion) resource directory

MyHealth Devon feedback: *“This is a great resource for me to direct parents and young people who are on the pathway and awaiting assessment to. I'm very happy it's been pulled together, so thank you!”*

Feedback from CYP around health resource *“I like the colourful room, it looks relaxing. The information board looks easy for me to read. It will be good fun to use my mum's phone to see what comes up when we scan the QR code”.*

Impact of Early Help Team

The decrease in the waiting times for support by speech and language therapists and increase in the number of children and young people accessing early help and support without being placed on the waiting list. 58.6% (July 2025) of young people accessing the service through request to help calls are supported through our Early Help offer.

Preparation for Adulthood

The Local Area now has over 100 supported internships in the city and have been recognised as a leading example in this area. At the time of inspection there were only 9 supported interns. 100% of young people working within this programme and the Your Futures scheme have moved into employment and training.

To further enhance the transition support and knowledge across the partnership, a new web page has been designed and launched on the Plymouth Online Directory to provide succinct and clear support for children, young people and their families.

We have improved our approach to Transitions Team for young people aged 14–25 through development and use of a protocol to support practice across children's and adult's teams. We will continue to strengthen this work as we draw on excellent practice in other areas to ensure that transitions in social care now happen much sooner. We have already commenced prioritisation and planning at aged 16 and will bring this back earlier to aged 14. A tracking system and Care Act data will underpin planning, and the team will operate collaboratively around each young person to tailor support to individual needs.

Conclusion

In summary, we believe strong progress has been made since the inspection of the local area partnership in June 2023. This has been externally and independently validated and we continue to embed robust practice and pursue continuous improvement for our children and young people.

Lisa McDonald

Head of Service SEND

30 September 2025