

OUTCOME OF SEND MONITORING INSPECTION OF THE PLYMOUTH LOCAL AREA PARTNERSHIP



1. Background

Under Section 20 of the Children Act 2004, Ofsted and CQC revisited Plymouth to assess whether the Local Area Partnership, which includes Plymouth City Council, Devon Integrated Care Board, education settings across the city, health services, Plymouth Parent Carer Voice, Plymouth Information and Advice Service and wider voluntary and community services, had taken effective action in response to weaknesses identified in the 2023 inspection. Inspectors examined governance, leadership, service delivery and lived experience across the system, and considered whether the partnership's collective actions were sufficient to demonstrate meaningful improvement.

2. Overall Outcome

Inspectors concluded that Plymouth has taken effective action in relation to all five priority areas. This means that reasonable and credible progress has been made since the full inspection. The findings recognise a significant strengthening of system leadership, a marked improvement in multi-agency collaboration and a clearer, more coherent strategic direction for SEND. Inspectors acknowledged that many developments are already having a positive impact on children and young people's experiences. However, they also emphasised that improvements are not yet fully embedded and that continued focus, consistency and long-term planning are essential to prevent regression and sustain improvements.

3. Summary of Key Improvements

3.1 Leadership, Culture and Governance

Inspectors found that the partnership has undergone a considerable cultural shift, moving from previously fragmented arrangements to a more cohesive and accountable system. Children and young people are now firmly placed at the centre of planning and decision-making. Governance arrangements, including the SEND Improvement Board and associated delivery structures, have been strengthened and now provide clearer oversight and challenge. Co-production has improved, with initiatives such as the Ten Wishes Charter and work with the Youth Ascends group demonstrating a meaningful effort to integrate the voice of young people into service design. Relationships between professionals across education, health and social care have also improved, resulting in more constructive dialogue and a shared sense of ownership for outcomes.

3.2 Early Identification and Early Help

The inspection found significant progress in the early identification of SEND. Family Hubs, the Families First approach and investment in the Healthy Child Programme have strengthened the ability of services to identify needs quickly and consistently. The Transitions Portal and improved processes for referral have contributed to more timely responses for children with emerging needs. Early years settings and schools report increased confidence in providing inclusive support due to targeted workforce development and enhanced multi-agency training. Inspectors also noted that the partnership is making deliberate efforts to support children who may previously have missed opportunities for early intervention.

3.3 Reduction of Exclusions

Permanent exclusions for pupils with Education, Health and Care Plans have reduced markedly across the city. The partnership has placed a strong emphasis on prevention, with multi-agency mechanisms such as the Vulnerable Pupils Panel intervening rapidly where exclusion risks emerge. Schools have benefited from increased support from CAMHS and specialist outreach teams, helping them respond more effectively to the social, emotional and mental health needs of pupils. Many schools have used partnership funding to create tailored in-school provision that combines academic support with therapeutic interventions. This has contributed to greater inclusion, improved engagement and stronger relationships with families.

3.4 Risk Management on Waiting Lists

Inspectors found that clearer and more consistent processes are now in place to assess risk and prioritise children and young people waiting for specialist assessment or intervention. The “Help Whilst Waiting” offer provides families with practical support and strategies during periods of delay, and many families reported that this has been helpful. Crisis responses via CAMHS and specialist teams have improved, ensuring that children with escalating needs receive timely intervention. However, despite these developments, waiting times for neurodevelopmental assessments and speech and language therapy remain too long, and some families continue to experience gaps in communication about next steps. Inspectors also raised the importance of sustaining progress and noted the risk of systemic change and the importance of continuous investment to improvement.

3.5 Support for Children with SEND and Social Care Needs

The partnership has strengthened its oversight of children with SEND who also require social care support. The Children’s Disability Team has increased its capacity, allowing social workers to spend more time working intensively with families and tailoring support packages to children’s individual needs. Short breaks assessments and reviews have become more consistent, and transition planning for young people approaching adulthood has improved due to better joint working between children’s and adult services. Inspectors also noted improved oversight of children placed out of area, with clearer scrutiny of placement quality and stronger planning for returning young people closer to home where appropriate.

4. Areas Requiring Continued Focus

Whilst the effective action judgement indicates strong progress, inspectors stressed that further work is needed to ensure that improvements become fully embedded in everyday practice. Some families still report that they do not feel the benefits of recent changes, and inconsistent communication continues to affect trust in the system. Waiting times for neurodevelopmental assessment and speech and language therapy remain a significant concern, and some families are withdrawing children from school or choosing elective home education due to perceived gaps in provision.

5. Next Steps for Continuous Improvement

5.1 For the partnership to maintain momentum and ensure lasting impact, several ongoing priorities must be addressed. Communication with families needs to be strengthened so that improvements are more visible and parents feel better informed about changes, decisions and available support.

5.2 Reducing waiting times for key assessments must remain a critical focus, alongside improving the regularity and clarity of communication with families during these periods. The partnership will need to develop a sustainable, long-term financial and workforce strategy to preserve the gains made to date.

5.3 It is also essential that inclusive practice becomes consistently embedded across all schools to prevent disengagement and ensure that every child has access to appropriate support.

5.4 The short breaks offer requires further development, with clearer information for families and better use of data to understand needs and gaps.

5.5 Finally, strong governance and performance monitoring must continue, ensuring that decision-making remains transparent, evidence-based and rooted in the lived experiences of children and young people.

6. Ensuring action on inspection findings

The Local Area Partnership is reviewing the detailed SEND Delivery Plan to ensure that all elements of continuous improvement are captured and monitored through our robust governance arrangements. For some areas there are distinctive plans in place, such as the accelerated plan for elective home education.

7. Conclusion

Plymouth's Local Area Partnership has made substantial progress in addressing the weaknesses identified in the 2023 inspection. The findings from Ofsted and CQC confirm that the partnership has taken effective action across all priority areas and that significant cultural and operational improvements are taking hold. However, continued commitment, consistent practice and long-term planning are required to ensure that these improvements are sustained and that all children and young people with SEND benefit from a high-quality, inclusive local system.