



Department
for Education



Jo Fisher, Director of Children's Services, Hertfordshire County Council, Councillor Richard Roberts, Leader of the Council, Hertfordshire County Council, Beverley Flowers, Deputy Chief Executive Officer Hertfordshire and West Essex Integrated Care Board

15 January 2025

Dear Jo, Beverley and Richard,

Hertfordshire: 6-MONTHLY SEND STOCKTAKE MEETING: REVIEW OF STRATEGIC PLAN AND PRIORITY ACTION PLAN

Thank you for your participation in the recent stocktake process, including the meeting on 7 November 2024 to review the progress made against your Priority Action Plan (PAP) and your Improvement Plan over the past six months. This letter provides a summary of the discussion.

We are particularly grateful for the contributions from representatives of the Hertfordshire Parent Carer Involvement (HPCI), the young people with SEND that are working with leaders in Hertfordshire to deliver some of the projects and improvement programmes, local authority officers, the Integrated Care Board, and school leaders and elected members who attended the meetings. We are grateful for the co-operation, openness and honesty of all who contributed to the evidence gathering conversations that were held during September and October. It was heartening to hear about the progress that has made in implementing the SEND improvement plan.

This letter provides a summary of the discussion regarding the progress made against the priority actions and areas for improvement. We acknowledge that efforts across the local partnership have prioritised acting with urgency to address the two areas for priority action from the Ofsted/CQC inspection outcome. Nonetheless, there is also evidence of good work against the five improvement areas (as below) through the partnership's prioritisation strategies, we expect further evidence of impact against the improvement areas to come in due course.

Priority Action 1: ‘Leaders should act with urgency to accelerate their data dashboard to have a shared understanding of the exact provision for SEND in Hertfordshire and its quality so that they can target coherent activity’

Whilst this priority action is subject to a deep dive in January 2025 to fully assess the progress being made, it is evident that the development of the data dashboard has been instrumental to informing the SEND work that the local area does. The dashboard contains relevant indicators to measure the progress made in implementing the improvement plan and its impact. To reiterate this, Dame Christine Lenehan has highlighted its potential to be a national exemplar. We also welcome how open and efficient the team is when providing data that has been requested. A full assessment and recommendation of this priority action will follow the deep dive in January 2025.

Priority Action 2: ‘Leaders should work more collaboratively and in partnership across all of SEND provision, with secure governance and quality assurance arrangements in place, and with a particular urgent focus on addressing the areas leaders have identified in their strategy for SEND’.

There was good evidence of stronger governance and joint working. There is a strong commitment from elected members, who have contributed a helpful combination of support and challenge, and the SEND Priority Executive Board, independently chaired by Dame Christine Lenehan, has a good oversight of progress. The development of the quality assurance framework and programme of quality audits of services also provides a helpful framework for evaluating the quality of services. The local area evidenced how the framework has been used to make improvements. There has also been an increase in the involvement of children and young people with SEND, increasing the prevalence of children and young people’s voice in decision making. A great example of this has been the reverse mentoring young people have provided to senior leaders. The experts by experience programme have also enabled children and young people with SEND to be included in the development of projects from the start. Hertfordshire Parent Carer Involvement are regularly engaged in strategic conversations and have made significant contributions to the implementation of the improvement plan. It will be important to ensure HPCI has the capacity to support continued improvements in Hertfordshire.

Area for Improvement 1: ‘Leaders across the partnership should address the variability in children and young people’s access to health services that exists in different areas within the local area so that all children and young people with SEND in Hertfordshire have an equal opportunity to access appropriate provision and support that meets their needs.’

Area for Improvement 4: ‘Leaders should further address the gaps and delays in service provision to meet the full range of needs of children and young people with SEND. This includes services for ASD, ADHD, mental health, audiology and speech and language.’

The local partnership in Hertfordshire produced a very comprehensive action plan to address challenges with access to health services. This plan is regularly reviewed at board meetings and through the access to health services workstream and escalations that have been made. Three initiatives have been instrumental in seeing positive outcomes in health provisions including: the mental health support teams in schools, partnership for inclusion of neurodiversity in schools programme and sensory support pathways. Outreach pathways for mainstream schools have also been a driver for change in health provision. The local partnership also provided reassurance of a stronger understanding of system-wide concerns that has improved partnership working, leading to a more holistic assessments of access to health care. Additionally, the recruitment and retention of speech and language therapists and the rolling out of catch-up clinics has helped to reduce waiting times for therapeutic services. Improvements in occupational therapy has also had significant impact in some cases which we heard directly from parents.

Area for Improvement 2: ‘Leaders across the partnership should act to improve the quality of new and existing EHC plans and ensure that plans meaningfully capture the voice and experience of children and young people with SEND and their families’

We recognise the substantial additional investment to increase staffing in the SEND teams. Coupled with the extensive SEND academy training, this is improving the timeliness of new Education, Health and Care Plans and their review. The quality of new EHCPs have also improved including ensuring the voices of children and young people are captured. Children and young people also reported feeling more included in the process. Parental feedback of recent EHCP processes indicate that levels of satisfaction have increased, and levels of dissatisfaction has reduced since the time of the inspection. The local area is on track to achieve milestones in the improvement plan regarding EHCPs timescales, annual reviews, quality of the content of new EHCPs compliments received and staff training.

Area for Improvement 3: ‘Leaders should take action to ensure that pupils with EHC plans are attending the provision as stated on their plans, that the provision is effective in meeting needs, and that the use of part-time timetables is appropriate and is carefully managed and monitored’

There has been substantive investment into the capital programme to create additional special school places to ensure pupils are attending the relevant provision. There has also been a reduction in children waiting over a year for a special school place which should support the local area in ensuring pupils with EHCPs are attending a provision that meets their need. The local area has also increased staffing to reduce the number of children who are on part-time timetables and to provide further support for children who are missing education. Since September

2024, the partnership has strengthened considerably the arrangements for identifying, monitoring and tracking children on parttime timetables and children missing education. A multi-agency support pathway has been developed enhancing the support to help increase the participation of these children in education.

Area for Improvement 5: 'The local area partnership should act to address parents' and carers' concerns at an early stage to reduce dissatisfaction and eliminate the need for parents and carers to have to follow formal routes.'

There has been a reduction in the number of acute complaints indicating that dissatisfaction with the SEND services in Hertfordshire is decreasing. This can be attributed to the new processes that have been rolled out by the local area. Namely, the development of the complaints framework and learning from the feedback. Other areas worth recognising are the additional posts dedicated to preventative work and expanding the resolution and reconciliation team, and the piloting of a complaint audit response tool to raise the quality of early responses.

Conclusion

Overall, the SEND advisor alongside the NHSE SEND lead evaluated that Hertfordshire is on track in implementing many aspects of their improvement plan, demonstrating some examples of good practice. With sustained progress, Hertfordshire should reach a number of the milestones they have set for themselves across the areas for priority action and the areas for improvement.

Areas for Continued Focus

As outlined above and during the stocktake meeting, there are several areas where progress against the improvement plan has been made. Following the conversations had as part of the stocktake process, the below areas require some further work. We acknowledge that the local area is aware of these recommendations based on their own assessment and have begun rolling out strategic plans for addressing these areas of work. These include:

- Waiting times and geographic variation in access to health services. Continue work in partnership to address the geographic variation in access to health services and improving waiting times for ADHD, autism assessments and some mental health services, to support further progress against the improvement plan.
- EHCPs. Continue to sustain the progress in reducing the number of EHCPs issued over 20 weeks. With focus on further reducing those waiting over 30 and 52 weeks for EHCPs as this is likely to be the cause of frustration and distress for families and complaints. Evidence how annual reviews are being used to improve the quality of existing plans and improving the percentage of year 11/12 phase transfer reviews completed and clarifying annual review processes with schools. Continue the work to bring the SEND tribunal rate down to the statistical neighbour average.

- Impact: There has been evidence that the improvement plan is beginning to have a positive impact on the experiences of some children and young people. There should be further benefits as recently introduced measures start to have an impact. How the local area responds to the increasing requests for EHCPs, sustaining the progress on annual reviews of EHCPs and the extent to which waiting times for health services are addressed will be important to ensuring the benefits of the improvement plan are felt across a wider number of children and young people.
- Communication: The local area has already done much to improve communications with some very good information in newsletters, briefings, meetings with stakeholders and the improvements to the local offer. During the stocktake, parents and headteachers identified a few areas where they thought communication could be improved and we understand that the partnership has started to address this.

Next Steps:

Your next review to assess further progress against your Strategic Plan via a deep dive into Priority Action 1 will take place on 27 January 2025.

Your SEND Advisor, Brian Gale, and NHS England Advisor, Louise Warren, will continue to offer support and challenge. Please contact them if you require further assistance.

We are copying this letter to: Hero Slinn, Director for Inclusion and Skills, Hertfordshire County Council, Tony Fitzpatrick, Director for Education, Hertfordshire County Council, Lorraine Mulrone, Head of SEND NHS England, Samantha Rostom, Head of Improvement and Transformation, Hertfordshire County Council Sarah Hannington, Interim Programme Director for Children and Young People, Herts and West Essex ICB, Brian Gale, Independent SEND Advisor, Louise Warren, NHS England Regional SEND Lead, East of England, Sharon Thornton, Regional Lead for SEND Improvement, and Ella Taggart, DfE Case Lead.

Yours sincerely,



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NHS East of England