



Department
for Education



Elizabeth Hartley, Director of Children's Services, Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council,
Paul Stuart, Leader of the Council,
Graham Urwin, Chief Executive of Integrated Care Board

10 January 2025

Dear Elizabeth, Paul and Graham

Wirral SEND Improvement Notice Stocktake Review: 26th November 2024

Thank you for attending the stocktake meeting on 26 November 2024 to review the progress made against your SEND Improvement Plan and the actions taken following the Improvement Notice, published on 7 May 2024.

We are particularly grateful for the contributions from representatives of the Parent Carer Forum (PCF), local authority officers, and the Integrated Care Board (ICB) who attended the meeting.

The purpose of this joint letter is to provide a summary of the discussions held at the stocktake meeting, documenting specific feedback from participants on the progress made and actions taken, based on evidence from the six months leading up to and during the stocktake meeting.

Section 5 of the Improvement Notice: [section 5 of the Improvement Notice](#) required the Local Area Partnership to take a number of steps to establish an effective Improvement Board to ensure that there is clear evidence of progression.

DFE and NHS England officials and a DFE-appointed SEND adviser have been in regular attendance at Wirral SEND Improvement Boards and report a significant improvement in strategic oversight and governance in the last 6 months. It is noted that the improved relationship and engagement with the PCF, active engagement and oversight from elected members, including the leader of the council, and the strategic leadership and oversight of the Chief Executive of Wirral Council has ensured robust governance and accountability. You have presented clear evidence of progression in implementing the revised improvement plan, established to address the significant weaknesses highlighted in the SEND Inspection report. We are,

therefore, content that the actions required in section 5 of the Improvement Notice have been implemented.

As a result of the progress made to implement improved systems and structures and processes, the Partnership has categorised three areas for improvement (referenced as areas 4, 8 and 9 below) as “business-as-usual”. DFE and NHS England officials are assured that activity to address these areas for improvement is embedded in the support provided to children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities in the area, and their families.

Areas for Improvement 1: strengthen the quality and timeliness of EHC assessments and annual reviews.

There has not been significant improvement in the proportion of EHCPs completed within the statutory 20-week timeframe. However, the Partnership has a recovery plan in place which is overseen as part of the SEND governance structures. The Partnership also provided evidence of the investment and activity undertaken to increase the capacity of the SEND and Educational Psychology (EP) services in this and the next financial year. A SEND Quality Assurance framework is now in place, which includes a monthly, multi-agency assurance group.

The Partnership identified that the next steps are to:

- complete recruitment to the SEND and EP services, with a view to making a significant increase in the proportion of EHCPs completed within 20 weeks,
- act on the outcomes of the EHCP quality assurance process to increase the proportion of EHCPs rated “good” or better.

Area for Improvement 2: Embed meaningful co-production with parents and carers.

The Partnership provided evidence of the activity taken place to embed the co-production charter into day-to-day SEND activity. 45% of local authority children’s services staff have undertaken dedicated co-production training in recent months with plans to reach 95%, recognising the challenge of training sessional staff. Health staff currently all undertake the mandatory Oliver McGowan training, and the Designated Clinical Officer (DCO) facilitates training to health providers which includes co-production. We heard from the Parent Carer Forum (PCF) that co-production has greatly improved and that the PCF were much more engaged and involved in SEND improvement activity. The PCF also said that parents and carers may not yet be feeling the impact of this on the ground, that it is important that they feel like their voices are heard and encouraged more face-to-face engagement.

The Partnership identified that the next steps are to:

- complete delivery of training for all relevant local authority staff and firm up plans for specific co-production training for relevant health staff,
- improve communications with parents and carers following all decisions, as part of the new EHCP partnership approach,
- co-produce the new SEND strategy.

Area for Improvement 3: Increase parent satisfaction with the area’s provision.

Area for Improvement 4: Improve the use and utility of the published local offer.

Area for Improvement 5: Improve communication with parents and carers across the area.

Area for Improvement 6: Improve the relationship between the Local Area Partnership and the Parent Carer Participation Wirral.

The Partnership provided evidence of fluctuating satisfaction with local provision. In addition, the PCF presented evidence to the Improvement Board which included positive feedback on a number of engagement events as well as for the EP service, but also themes of poor communication, insufficient specialist provision and a high turnover of staff, leading to a lack of continuity and rapport.

The Partnership presented evidence of the implementation of the SEND strategy 2024-26, which includes a significant increase in Resource Provision and Specialist Provision. Changes made to the SENDLO local offer have resulted in an increase in its use and utility and this continues to be monitored by local leaders. The Partnership have recently appointed a Communications Lead for SEND Improvement and presented evidence that changes to the SEND team will lead to greater management supervision and swifter resolution to local issues.

The Partnership identified that the next steps are to:

- consider further activity to address the concerns raised in the latest Parent/Carer survey
- further implement the SEND sufficiency strategy.
- deliver the SEND Improvement Communications strategy.

Area for Improvement 7: Improve Joint Commissioning arrangements:

The Partnership has a Joint Commissioning lead in post, jointly funded by the Local Authority and the ICB. Whilst there has been a small increase in jointly commissioned services and individual packages of care for children with complex needs, it was recognised by the Partnership that this area needs more focus and continued development.

The Partnership identified that the next steps are to:

- develop and implement a robust joint commissioning strategy and plan, informed by lived experience and analysis of local data.

Area for Improvement 8: Improve Strategic Oversight to ensure effectiveness of plans and provision and hold leaders, managers and partners to account:

We heard from the PCF about a recognisable shift in accountability and the improvement to governance arrangements since the Improvement Notice was issued in May 2024. We also heard from Senior Responsible Officers (SRO's) about the benefits of the improved governance structure and the clarity that this has brought to them.

Likewise, DFE and NHS England officials and a DFE-appointed SEND Advisor have been in regular attendance at Wirral SEND Improvement Boards and report a significant improvement in strategic oversight and governance in the last 6 months.

It was also noted that all Partnership Board members have benefited from a formal induction to their roles and responsibilities as Board members. This has included elected members, whose support and challenge to the Board has been welcomed, as, not only has it provided officers with direct links to other committees/agencies but has also equipped the elected members with a more in-depth knowledge and oversight which, in turn, enables them to respond directly to issues raised by residents.

The Partnership identified that the next steps are to:

- ensure that the systems and processes implemented to improve strategic oversight and hold the partnership to account for delivery are embedded and sustained.
- gather evidence of impact and improved outcomes for children, young people and their families.

Area for Improvement 9: Address the lack of accurate, up to date and useful information informing the areas plans and the impact of these actions:

Over the last 6 months we have seen strong evidence that the partnership is using accurate and timely data to inform area plans and to measure the impact of decisions. Improvement Boards are regularly informed by timely and appropriate data, analysis and evidence of the impact of improvements on the lived experience of children and families.

The Partnership identified that the next steps are to:

- continue to review the information shared across the Partnership to ensure that it remains relevant and useful to inform strategic decision making.

Area for Improvement 10: Embed the graduated response consistently across all schools and settings.

The Partnership presented evidence of the support and training provided to education settings and health providers to embed the graduated response consistently. There is also evidence that this work is going some way to reverse the growth in Education and Health Needs Assessments. The Partnership recognise that requests for Elective Home Education and rates of persistence absence remain high.

The Partnership identified that the next steps are to:

- continue to work with schools, trusts and other education settings to further embed the graduated response.
- fully implement the Delivering Better Value plan to evidence and review the health therapies as part of the graduated response and apply the graduated response Quality Assurance framework across schools and settings.

Next Steps:

We will continue to review progress against each Area for Improvement.

Your next review to assess further progress against your Improvement Plan will take place in May 2025.

Your SEND Advisor, Kevin Burns, and NHS England Advisor, Lindsey Marlton, will continue to offer support and challenge. Please contact them if you require further assistance.

We are copying this letter to: Paul Satoor Chief Executive (Wirral MBC), Lorraine Mulroney Head of SEND (NHS England), Lindsey Marlton, Regional SEND Advisor (NHSE), Kevin Burns, Independent SEND Advisor, Carl Fagan, Regional Lead for SEND Improvement, and James Backhouse AD for Education Wirral MBC

Yours sincerely,



Samantha Morrison
Head of North West Vulnerable Children's Unit,
Department for Education



Steven Colfar
Deputy Director of Nursing -
Professional & System
Development
NHS England North West