



CHILDREN YOUNG PEOPLE AND EDUCATION COMMITTEE

WEDNESDAY 5TH MARCH 2025

REPORT TITLE:	SEND IMPROVEMENT
REPORT OF:	DIRECTOR FOR CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND EDUCATION

REPORT SUMMARY

This report provides members of the Children, Young People and Education Committee with an update on the improvement programme for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) for the Local Area in Wirral. The report covers the period from Mid January 2025.

The January 2025 Local Area SEND Partnership Board (LASPB) meeting was primarily focussed on updates in relation to the recovery plans in place for Improving the Quality and Timeliness of Education Health and Care Plans and Annual Reviews; Reducing waiting times for access to Speech and Language Therapy Services and improvements in the Neurodevelopmental Pathway. While all the recovery plans are available on SENDLO (www.sendlowirral.co.uk) this committee paper primarily focuses on the areas that are the Local Authority's statutory duties.

The report also provides an overview the LASPB's Self Evaluation from January 2025.

RECOMMENDATION/S

The Children, Young People and Education Committee is requested to note the progress of the Local Area SEND Partnership Board in progressing system improvement as required by the Improvement Notice.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1.1 It has been agreed with DfE and NHS England through the revised Terms of Reference for the Local Area SEND Partnership Board that the Health and Wellbeing Board is the appropriate forum to provide oversight of SEND improvement activity in Wirral, ensuring that the Written Statement of Action (WSoA) is fully delivered by October 2025. This report is presented to the Children, Young People and Education Committee to provide assurance of improvement and enable alignment with the business of the committee.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 No other options have been considered. The Local Area SEND Partnership Board (LASPB) will provide updates for information to Wirral Health and Wellbeing Board, the Children, Young People and Education Committee, the Adult Social Care and Public Health Committee, and Wirral Safeguarding Children Partnership.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 The LASPB received a range of reports on areas of progress over the reporting period to January 2025 in its last meeting held on the 28th January. The January meeting focus was on the existing recovery plans in place for the key service improvement areas identified in Wirral's Notice to Improve, namely in relation to Education, Health and Care Plans, (EHCPs), the Neurodevelopmental (ND) Pathway and waiting times for access to Speech and Language Therapy Services. Papers and minutes are available on SENDLO, Wirral's Local Offer website for all LASPB meetings. This paper is focussed on the EHCP and Annual Review Recovery Plan update as this is primarily a Local Authority statutory responsibility.

3.2 EHCP Quality and Timeliness

The EHCP Recovery Plan was originally approved by the LASPB in April 2024 and was split into two phases. Phase one which was concerned with the restructure and redesign of the SEND Statutory Referral and Assessment Team (SENDSTART) and was scheduled to complete originally at the end of 2024 calendar year. Phase two focussed on improvements to staff training and practice, quality of assessments and EHCP quality and was due to be undertaken across 2025 and 2026. The table in fig 1 shows the activity that was scheduled against the recovery plan in phase one.

Action	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	RAG rating
Update and revise the SENDSTART Handbook so that it reflects our aspirations										Green
Agree and publicise/communicate "our Journey" setting out where we think we are and how we will reach our aspirations										Amber
Develop and devise a process to monitor and reduce average plan completion times with a priority focus on "stuck" plans over 30 weeks.										Green
Develop timelines for phase transfers with early communication so that schools and families understand our process more clearly										Green
Implementation of the EHCP QA Framework										Green
Review of EHCP Decision Making Group to ensure accountability and QA of decision making across the partnership										Green
Restructure referral and assessment team to ensure sufficient staffing to meet capacity and delivery stability.										Green
Provide SENDSTART team colleagues with a toolkit to support with person centred planning										Amber
NASEN L3/4 qualifications for all SENDSTART staff started- CPD										Amber
Data cleanse for Migration to Liquid Logic EYES										Green
Migration to Liquid Logic EYES and Team Training										Green
MI reporting suite developed in LL EYES										Green
Invision360 QA Feedback process in place and impacting work										Green
Review of High Needs Funding Policy to ensure that top up funding for pupils with EHCPs is understood, transparent and equitable.										Amber

Fig1 – EHCP recovery plan phase 1 activity

3.3 Phase one activity is now complete or scheduled to be completed over January-March 2025. Those areas that will complete over the course of January to March 2025 are shown in amber in fig 1 above and concern the review of high needs funding currently being undertaken led by Martin McKenna, Consultant Special School Head. Other areas showing in Amber are in relation to the ongoing work around staff induction training and support as these are ongoing.

- 3.4 As previously reported the slippage in timescales for phase one activity was due to the scale of investment in the service by Wirral Council which necessitated the funding being approved through The Council's Policy and Resources Committee. The scale of investment will over the course of the next two years ensure that the service can deliver and meet the needs of Wirral's children and young people with SEND and their families, however it is recognised that the initial delay has had an impact on the original expectations set out in the recovery plan.
- 3.5 The April 2024 recovery plan committed the service to the following outcomes by the end of 2024 based on the planning assumption that the restructure would be in place for September 2024.
- EHCP 20wk completion rate at least in line with national average
 - All phase transfer reviews and emergency reviews attended by an SEN officer
 - 0% of EHCPs that have not been reviewed in the previous 18 months
 - 50% of new EHCPs graded good or better in Invision 360
 - 50% reduction in complaints and Tribunal appeals relating to timeliness and communication

With the increased expansion of SENDSTART and the Educational Psychology Service and the delay that caused these initial targets have not been met. This was highlighted to LASPB in the September update. Appendix 1 contains the overall updated recovery plan which includes revised timescales for the commitments above and ongoing.

- 3.6 It is recognised that none of the work to date has yet had an impact on the headline performance figures. However, within the activity undertaken over the last seven months in relation to the recovery plan there are a number of areas that demonstrate that investment and the foundations put in place are beginning to have a material impact on improving delivery. Of particular welcome are the messages coming back into the team where schools, partner agencies or families are telling us that their experiences are starting to feel better and thanking caseworkers.
- 3.7 **EHCP timeliness:** Although headline figures for 20 week completion was below 20% for the 2024 calendar year, the new EHC Partnership oversight and the move to the Liquid Logic EHM case management system has provided sufficient impact to ensure all EHCNA requests that have been received since October 2024 have had "decisions to assess" made within the statutory timeframe. Following LASPB's decision for more than focussed tracking of cases in December, MI reports are being developed over January and February 2025 to closely monitor and track the progress of EHCNA requests received since October 2024. MI reports and case progress will form part of the fortnightly supervisions that locality managers have started holding with caseworkers since the team reached effective capacity this month.
- 3.8 In addition to the enhanced tracking and oversight of new cases there remains over 800 open EHC cases in the system with the vast majority at draft stage and over 20 weeks since initial submission. These will need to be dealt with alongside the additional 100-150 EHCNA requests that come in each month. In order to manage

the balance of caseloads locality managers will have weekly targets for EHCP completions with the aspiration to manage down the overdue cases over the next 18 months.

- 3.9 It is recognised that SENDSTART needs to balance ensuring that good practice is becoming embedded, and timeliness expectations are the norm for individual cases, while at the same time working with and prioritising those families who have already had to wait too long. Figures will fluctuate slightly over time dependent on the number of needs assessment requests that come in over 2025, but based on the number approved in 2024 the four geographic localities will be targeted to achieve 13 completed EHCPs per week over the next 18 months. It is proposed that these metrics are added to the service scorecard for oversight.
- 3.10 Locality managers, supported by the SENDSTART Manager and the AD for SEND and Inclusion will ensure that cases that can be finalised effectively are done so in a timely manner and that those that need decisions escalating are escalated in accordance with the guidance set out in the EHCP Handbook.
- 3.11 **Phase Transfer Reviews:** Wirral was successful in meeting the Feb 15th phase transfer deadline in 2024. However, the lack of capacity in the system and the process used provided insufficient support to schools and families and this led to a number of complaints and tribunals in relation to phase transfers. In line with the commitments made to the LASPB in the EHCP Recovery Plan, consultation with schools, and listening to families, the phase transfer process has been wholly revised for 2025.
- 3.12 As a result schools have been aware of those children with EHCPs that are likely to be allocated to them following consultation. As ever parental preference has been prioritised and remains at the forefront of decision making. For all special schools and those with specialist commissioned places allocations meetings have been organised to discuss any school concerns in relation to either the overall number of potential pupils or individual cases.
- 3.13 These changes have been recognised and welcomed by schools and the team are hopeful that in conjunction with the increase in specialist places that Wirral has invested in over 2024/2025 phase transfer allocations will be far smoother and that the parental experience and confidence will increase as a result.
- 3.14 **Relationships and communication:** In line with the intent of the redesign of SENDSTART, caseworkers have now been allocated to schools and are starting to build relationships with them. This is a change that has been welcomed overall. Annual Review meetings and emails in line with the revised annual review process (LASPB Briefing Note October 2024) are going out over January as the improved capacity begins to take effect.
- 3.15 Relationships and communication with families also needs to be built. There is enormous confidence in desire and intention within the SENDSTART Caseworkers to build and maintain good strong relationships with families and to communicate in an effective and timely manner. However, it is recognised that there is work to do to

rebuild trust with many families. In order to be able to evidence the new ways of working and culture within the team reporting on use of notes and contacts with families are being built into the case management system. This will be part of the MI suite that locality managers will use in fortnightly supervisions and can be added to the service scorecards.

- 3.16 **Educational Psychology Service (EPS):** Over December 2024 and January 2025 Wirral's EPS started seven assistant educational psychologists. This leaves a single vacancy at the assistant EP tier in the revised EPS structure that was approved by the ALSPB in May 2024. The assistant EPs will be utilised to support the team's qualified EPs in their statutory assessment work in addition to providing capacity for the EPS to support the ongoing implementation of the graduated approach, EBSA programme and early intervention and consultation model adopted in September 2024 with the commencement of link EPs for schools.
- 3.17 However, in line with the national challenge faced by local authorities to recruit qualified and experienced EPs, Wirral Council has met with limited success in its recruitment to date. Recruitment will continue over the start of 2025 as the service looks to exploit its contacts through the universities and growing reputation.
- 3.18 **LASPB Self Evaluation 2025** Over the Summer and Autumn 2024 the Local Area SEND Partnership Board through its Continuous Improvement Sub Group has developed a self-evaluation for SEND. The Local Area Self Evaluation has been structured to reflect the evaluation criteria from the Local Area Inspection Framework and Handbook in order to maintain a clear line of sight from the local area's improvement journey to impact on children and families.
- 3.19 The development of the Self Evaluation was started with individual services providing information and evaluations of the impact of what they do and their plans in place to improve delivery. These individual service evaluations were in many cases informed by service user feedback and individual consultations. Further workshops were then held with service leaders from Wirral Borough Council, Cheshire and Merseyside ICB, health service providers and stakeholders from families, schools and education providers. During the Autumn further workshops were specifically held with parents and carers to ensure that the self-evaluation as far as possible reflected the views of families.
- 3.20 The full self-evaluation can be found in appendix 2 below. However the headline findings from each of the evaluation criteria are:

Evaluation 1: Children and young people's needs are identified accurately and assessed in a timely and effective way.

Current position: Timeliness and quality of EHCPs continues to be a challenge in Wirral with the historic trend in demand growth at 15-20% year on year growth. As a result, 20-week timeliness has sat between 15-17%

throughout 2024. Typically, the quality of our therapeutic assessments means that children and young people's health needs are identified accurately. Feedback from parents and carers around NHS commissioned health services is generally positive and the local area continues to roll out WellComm Screening to better understand speech and communication needs in children in their early years. The local area has struggled to meet growth and demand, and there is a high level of commissioned private assessments where we are less confident in quality.

Evaluation 2: Children, young people and their families participate in decision-making about their individual plans and support.

Current position: There are pockets of good practice in involving children, young people and families in decision-making. However, this is inconsistent across the local area, and we are not content that there is a systematic approach. We recognise the voice of children and young people was not explicit in decision-making and we are taking steps to ensure that it is at the centre of young people's plans. Despite this, there remain many instances, particularly in the delivery of EOTAS packages, where support is specifically developed around the views and wishes of young people and families. Incorporating children, young people and family views in decision-making will be a key focus in Wirral's new 2024-8 SEND & Alternative Provision Strategy, which will focus on inclusion.

Evaluation 3: Children and young people receive the right help and support at the right time.

Current position: Overall there is a strong universal offer for children, young people and families in Wirral. However, where needs require a more targeted offer and approach, evidence suggests that there is more work required to ensure that children and young people constantly receive the right help and support at the right time. Wirral is beginning to show signs in some areas of developing strong practice around the quality of access to help and support. However, while they are reducing, waiting times are still too long in some areas and there are considerable demand issues for services. Strategically, the understanding of need is better, and the local area has published a Joint Strategic Needs Assessment for SEND which highlights areas for focus.

Evaluation 4: Children and young people are well prepared for their next steps and achieve strong outcomes.

Current position: Our data confirms that children and young people achieve strong outcomes compared to the national average especially in the early years and KS4 and 5 with specific programmes in place to achieve this. Data on reading, writing and maths at KS2, KS4 for EHCP, SEN Support are overall positive. Some issues continue to exist around consistency and many parents feel that their child/young person are not quite ready for their next

steps. Whilst this contrasts with what young people have told us and the data evidence, we recognise that families lack confidence that young people are ready. As an area Wirral compares favourably with statistical neighbours for SEND NEET and where innovative post 16 provision such as the supported internships scheme are in place, outcomes for those young people are better than in other areas. Despite an employment market that is dominated with SMEs and micro businesses Wirral continues to have a larger proportion of adults with learning difficulties in employment and has maintained an upward trend since the Covid pandemic

Evaluation 5: Children and young people with SEND are valued, visible and included in their communities.

Current position: There is a good breadth of offer to ensure children and young people with SEND are valued and included. We recognise this is an area where further work is required to ensure this becomes a ubiquitous element of our culture. In the best cases young people tell us that they value the range of the community offer available to them, both specialist and universal, but this is not always a consistent lived experience for many children and young people in Wirral.

Evaluation 6: Leaders are ambitious for children and young people with SEND

Current position: Our new governance structure and improvement programme are helping to ensure leaders are actively involved and ambitious for children and young people with SEND. We are creating a culture where we have high aspirations and that children and young people with SEND are visible, this was evident at the Council meeting of 2nd December 2024, when the Labour Group presented a motion on SEND, securing unanimous support to lobby government on behalf of children and young people with SEND and their families. We are starting to see a difference through our Local Area SEND Partnership Board and subgroups. We still have work to do in this area and our wish is to ensure Wirral children and young people with SEND are given the support that they need to live happy, healthy lives doing the things they love.

Evaluation 7: Leaders actively engage and work with children, young people and families.

Current position: Significant progress has been made in working with children, young people and families in some areas and relationships with parents/carers is improving. Wirral's parent carer forum is a key partner, Chairing a subgroup as well as representing the voice of parents in the partnership board. While there is legitimate challenge in the system as parents feel exhausted by historical lack of engagement and services remain under par, there is a demonstrable joint commitment to working together to improve families' lived experience. . As a partnership we are acutely aware

there is a gap in how we incorporate children and young people's voice consistently, to inform our strategic direction.

Evaluation 8: Leaders have an accurate, shared understanding of the needs of children and young people in the local area.

Current position: Leaders at a strategic level are better informed at an earlier stage about the emerging needs of children and young people with SEND, with this information being used to inform practice. Work is needed to ensure data and recording systems are used effectively to meet these needs at the right time and with the right support consistently. New governance arrangements and performance reporting from the SEND Dashboard and Scorecards are driving tangible improvements in shared understanding since last inspection. As a partnership our understanding of the key issues and challenges as well as the emerging good practice is much improved and increasingly we know ourselves better. Whilst we acknowledge that things aren't quite right, and changes yet to be felt by families, we know what needs to be done and by how much through having a complete picture and strategic oversight and the partnership is well placed to steer the strategic direction of improvements needed.

Evaluation 9: Leaders commission services and provision to meet the needs and aspirations of children and young people.

Current position: Since 2021, notable progress has been achieved in the area of joint commissioning, marked by the appointment of a joint commissioning lead and the establishment of a joint commissioning forum in 2022. A clear programme of priorities was developed based on the newly developed Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA). SEND and mental health were identified as priorities within the Health and Care Plan 2023-24. These priorities are overseen by the Strategic Transformation Board to ensure accountability, whilst the Joint Health and Care Commissioning Executive Group provide commissioning oversight. Specific areas of improvement include speech and language, neurodevelopment and care for children with complex needs. A position statement on progress was published on SENDLO in November 2023.

Evaluation 10: Leaders evaluate services and make improvements.

Current position: The work that has been put in place to ensure performance reporting is of a consistently high quality is beginning to enable leaders to identify trends in services, investigate the stories behind the data to fully understand the issues and make the required improvements. Over the last year leaders have engaged in and instigated a range of service evaluations and conversations with individual services and teams including around Education Health and Care Plans, the Neurodevelopmental Pathway and Speech and Language Therapy Services. While the partnership is confident that it is taking the correct approach, the impact of the improvements that joint evaluation has led to still needs to be shown more consistently. And felt more consistently by families.

- 3.21 The local area's SEND self evaluation alongside the SEND Joint Strategic Needs Assessment, feedback from the recent local area inspection including survey feedback from families form the backbone of the local area's understanding of what it needs to focus on over the next few years. As such it is a key document informing the development of Wirral's SEND Strategy due for approval in April 2025.

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 There are no direct resource implications arising from this report. The LASPB have considered those arising from improvement work on an individual basis and have agreed the necessary arrangements, as is documented in the board's minutes and action log.

5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The Council, working with the Integrated Care Board (ICB) and its other partner agencies must comply with the Improvement Notice and the actions it contains, as set out in Section 28 (2) of the Children and Families Act 2014. Failure to comply would lead to further intervention from the Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing.
- 5.2 Provision of Education, Health and Care Needs assessments and plans are statutory responsibilities under the Children and Families Act 2014

6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS

- 6.1 There are no direct resource implications arising from this report. The LASPB have considered those arising from improvement work on an individual basis and have agreed the necessary arrangements, as is documented in the board's minutes and action log.

7.0 RELEVANT RISKS

- 7.1 A risk and issues log is maintained and reviewed by the LASPB at each meeting. The LASPB Executive Group meets twice monthly to add additional oversight to risk management.
- 7.2 Should the Local Area SEND Partnership Board not deliver the improvement required as set out in the notice and Written Statement of Action further intervention under Section 497A of the Education Act 1996 would be invoked, thereby directing the Council to take further action to improve SEND services

8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

- 8.1 The Department for Education funds, via third sector organisation Contact, a parent carer forum for the local area. In Wirral, Parent Carer Participation Wirral (PCPW) are the designated group to represent the voice and experience of local families. PCPW are represented at the LASPB and its subgroups. The Participation & Engagement subgroup of the LASPB is Chaired by the Chair of PCPW.

8.2 The Local Area Self Evaluation was developed following engagement with a broad range of agencies, partners and stakeholders including parents, young people and schools workshops and consultation took place throughout the Summer and Autumn of 2024

9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

9.1 Wirral Council has a legal requirement to make sure its policies, and the way it carries out its work, do not discriminate against anyone. An Equality Impact Assessment is a tool to help council services identify steps they can take to ensure equality for anyone who might be affected by a particular policy, decision or activity.

10.0 ENVIRONMENT, BIODIVERSITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

10.1 Wirral Council and NHS Cheshire and Merseyside and partners are committed to carrying out their work in an environmentally responsible manner.

11.0 COMMUNITY WEALTH IMPLICATIONS

11.1 Community Wealth Building in Wirral focusses on partnerships and collaboration. These partnerships are led by Wirral Council with external partners and stakeholders, including residents. NHS Cheshire and Merseyside will support the Council in community wealth building by ensuring health and care organisations in the borough have a focus on reducing health inequalities and contribute to the development of a resilient and inclusive economy for Wirral.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – EHCP and Annual Review Rapid Recovery Plan
Appendix 2 - LASPB Local Area Self Evaluation Jan 2025

BACKGROUND PAPERS

The Local Area SEND and Alternative Provision Framework Area SEND inspections: framework and handbook - GOV.UK: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/area-send-framework-and-handbook/area-send-inspections-framework-and-handbook>

The full agenda and papers pack for the Local Area SEND Partnership are available on Wirral's Local Offer website: www.SENDLOWirral.co.uk

TERMS OF REFERENCE

This report is being considered by the Children, Young People and Education Committee in accordance with section a of its Terms of Reference:

(a) exercising management, oversight and delivery of services to children and young people in relation to their care, wellbeing, education or health, with the exception of any powers reserved to full Council.

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
Children, Young People and Education Committee	Sept 24
Children, Young People and Education Committee	Oct 24
Children, Young People and Education Committee	Nov 24
Children, Young People and Education Committee	Jan 25