

Report of the Director of Education, Work and Skills

SEND Update

1. INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 This report is to provide an update to Children's Scrutiny on the current position and context of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities in Stockport. This is the third update provided to Scrutiny in the last 2 municipal years following updates in November 2023 and February 2024. A further three performance discussions have also been held with Corporate Leadership Team reflecting the importance of these issues.
- 1.2 The report provides an update on Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) volume of demand, timeliness and communication and the position about preparations for the next SEND inspection.

2. NATIONAL CONTEXT

- 2.1 There are long standing challenges to the SEND system which is chronically underfunded. Insufficient resources are not meeting growing demand for SEND support with the added pressure from the DfE to reduce costs. There has been a significant increase in the number of children requiring SEND support, with the number of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) increasing dramatically. There is a shortage of suitable state funded school places and significant underfunding for capital projects. The independent private sector offers smaller physical environments and class sizes which is attractive to parents and is significantly more expensive. Many parents are choosing high-cost specialist independent placements as their parental choice and are willing to undertake legal challenges via Tribunal to secure the school setting they believe is necessary for their child.

3. STOCKPORT CONTEXT

- 3.1 Stockport's approach to these challenges does not provide an immediate solution but is a work in progress to address the longstanding nature of the issues. Stockport is not alone, and we continue to address several related factors.
- 3.2 The system is chronically underfunded. We have insufficient funding to meet the growing demand for SEND support. The current budget position is a £20million in-year overspend on the high needs block with a projected cumulative deficit at £43m by March 2025 increasing to c. 63m by March 2026 without any local reductions/cuts to current provision. We have the added pressure from the DfE to reduce costs as Stockport is part of the Delivering Better Value DfE initiatives with expectations of reduced deficits in budgets.

- 3.3 In addition and to compound, Stockport is part of the f40 lobby group¹ because our schools are some of the lowest funded schools in England from the perspective of per pupil funding which is the basic funds to set a school up. Additional notional funds are allocated based on proxy SEND indicators. Access to high needs top up funding is traditionally for those with an EHCP; which can act as a perverse incentive to request EHCPs as it enables schools to access additional funding. Stockport has a higher proportion of EHCPs than the national average.
- 3.4 The current context in Stockport is that we currently receive around £1,100 per pupil for special educational needs. This is amongst the lowest levels nationally. If we received the same amount as the best-funded local authority, we would receive around £85m more a year for Special Educational Needs. If we received the same funding level as close neighbours in the North West, we would receive between £6m and £21m more every year for Special Educational Needs. Cllr Wendy Meikle recently wrote to the Secretary of State for Education to outline our concerns and to ask for a fairer funding settlement.
- 3.5 We have a significant rise in the number of children requiring SEND support, with the number of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) increasing dramatically. The capacity to deliver plans in the 20 week timeframe has not kept pace with demand and there is a national shortage of Educational Psychologists with a need for additional EHCP Coordinators.
- 3.6 Local council funds are also being scrutinised to enable local sustainability of all council services, so additional investment is difficult. EHCP Coordinators on average have 200 cases each which makes it very difficult to maintain regular contact with families. To address this, we have proposed a communication protocol. We also have a recovery plan to reduce the historic build-up of the backlog which involved a comprehensive productivity analysis and process redesign leading to a restructure of the EHCP team and a change in practice for working with Education Psychology to maximise resources.
- 3.7 Whilst we have dramatically increased the number of specialist places available demand continues to outstrip supply. This has an impact by causing families emotional distress and frustration and an overall feeling that they have to fight to get the support that they believe their children are entitled to.

4. EHCP DEMAND, TIMELINESS AND COMMUNICATION

- 4.1 The demand for EHC needs assessments continues to increase. In 2025 so far there are currently 569 active assessments for an EHC Plan in progress. Despite increases in resource for the EHCP team, delivering EHC needs assessments within the 20 weeks timescale and managing 3620 active EHCPs is a challenge. The service is facing these challenges head on and making improvements to both timeliness and communication with families as set out in the 'EHCP recovery plan

¹ f40 is a cross-party local authority campaign group set up by the lowest funded councils for education in England with the aim of securing fairer funding for schools and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

4.2 In the academic Year 2023/24 while overall timeliness reduced this was in the context of increased demand. The team finalised 40% more new EHC plans than the year before. In addition the team maintained 3620 existing EHCP's. This is a total of over 4000 EHCPs the team are actively working to manage.

Description	2023	2024
EHC needs assessment requests received	823	840
No. of Initial EHC plans issued following an EHC needs assessment	429	608
Timeliness (Percentage)	9.8%	6.3%

4.3 In 2025 we started to see an improvement. Overall timeliness for completing EHC plans within 20 weeks for the year to date is 11.2% up from 6.3%. Although this is a small increase, we are anticipating this will continue to rise and have bigger increases month on month as the activity to deliver the recovery plan continues. This figure is skewed due to the size of the backlog of plans needing finalising that are already beyond 20 weeks

4.4 Excluding the backlog we see timeliness for new EHCPs improving. Since 1 January 2025 116 new EHCPs have been finalised. The current average time to complete the EHC needs assessment and finalise the plan is 22.7 weeks – close to our 20 week statutory timeframe.

4.5 The EHCP recovery plan sets out the approach being taken to improve the EHCP Service.

Recovery Plan



Communication

Impact of increases and accumulating backlog EHCP Coordinators average of 200 cases. This makes managing relationships a challenge. Team are working hard to manage expectations and prioritise parent/carer contacts. Communication protocol.

EHC Needs Assessment Backlog and Waiting Well

Each plan requires an Education Psychology report. Decision to Assess used to prioritise caseload activity for EPs and Coordinators. Decision to Issue used to allocate anticipated High Needs Top Up funding Band.

Team Structure and Management

Temporary additional capacity added to the team to reduce backlog and cover sickness and vacancies. Maintenance team members undertaking drafting assessments. Process mapping supporting time management and capacity analysis. Team redesign being worked on.

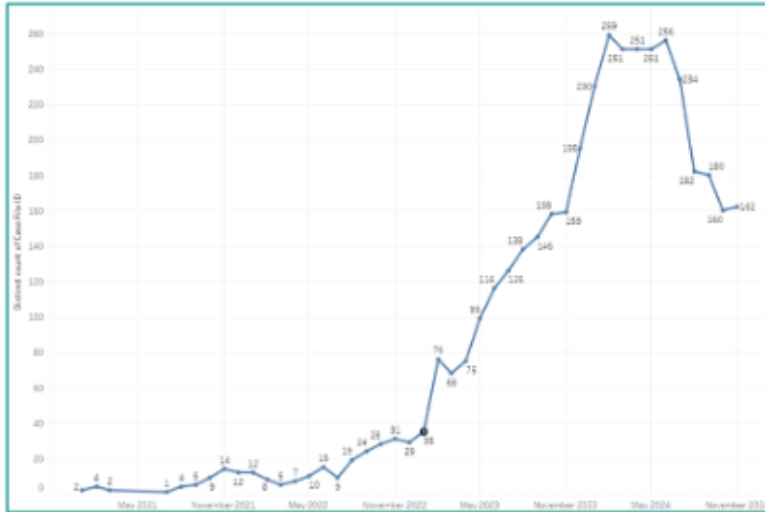
Appeals

Additional rigour at Decision to Assess panel resulting in an increase in appeals along with unhappy messages on social media.

Complaints

The volume of work, pressure on capacity, staff protecting plan writing time rather than communication has seen an increase in complaints – work underway to mitigate

4.6 The data evidence is showing that the EHCP service are working diligently, completing more EHC needs assessments than ever before, making progress clearing the backlog The service has achieved a reduction in the 'backlog' of plans waiting over 30 weeks to be finalised, and the 'backlog' is now the lowest since December 2023, down from the peak in March 2024 as show in the graph below.

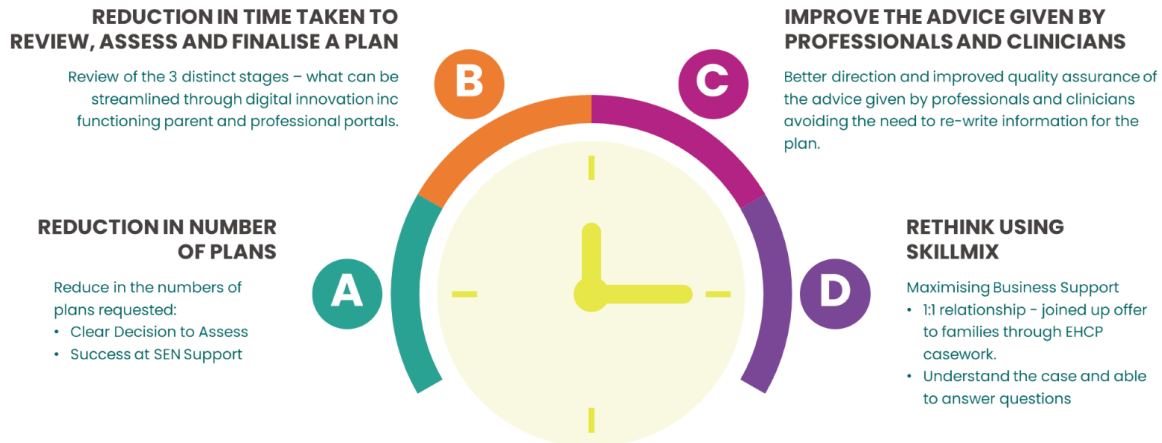


- 4.7 SEND Board have discussed and agreed that performance ‘backlogs’ will be cleared by the 2025 year end with a ‘steady state’ of c.300 active EHC needs assessments at any one time. By the year end of 2025 timeliness will improve to be the same as our peers with c.50% of plans completed in 20 weeks. Progress towards this goal is reviewed weekly, via live data sets, to ensure we remain on track.
- 4.8 We made the decision to ask the service to prioritise their time on writing and finalising plans. This approach has resulted in the positive impact of a significant reduction in the average waiting time for an EHCP to be finalised, and the ‘backlog’ of plans waiting also reduced. However, workers have been less able to respond to all families queries and communication became less frequent. This resulted in understandable frustration and a rise in complaints about it being difficult to get a response from the service and a lack of communication.
- 4.9 We recognised that as well as improving timeliness we also need to improve communication because waiting for the outcome of the EHC Needs assessment and for decisions to be made can be a worrying time for parents and carers. This increases if it is taking longer than the expected 20 weeks to achieve, and further still if the parent carer is not kept up to date about where the process is up to.
- 4.10 To address this we have done two things. We have developed the parent portal where parent carers will be able to log on and see the EHCNA progress without having to contact the worker and wait for a response. This is expected to be fully functional during the summer term 2025 and will reduce some of the frustration families have about knowing where the process is up to and being able to access key documents. Secondly, we have provided clarity for parent carers that there are four key points during the EHC needs assessment process when the worker will contact them directly so that parent carers know when to expect communication. Enquires over and above this will be responded to within 10 working days.
- 4.11 As part of the recovery plan a productivity and processing exercise has been completed. This has identified efficiencies that can be made in the EHCP process and potential future digital opportunities that are being explored. The staffing structure and resource required to provide a ‘steady state’ of good timeliness and

communication based on the current demand has been modelled and proposals for the future structure of the service are being prepared. These two exercises are key to improving families experiences of the EHCP service

STEADY STATE –REDUCING TIME REQUIRED

How can we cut down time and therefore resources



4.12 Overall we are seeing an improving picture for the timeliness for finalising new EHCPs, a reduction in the backlog and since September 2024, a reducing number of complaints about poor communication. There is still work to do to reach a steady state of consistent good timeliness and communication but we are making significant progress.

5. SEND INSEPTION

5.1 Stockport had a Local Area SEND inspection in 2018 which although it highlighted many strengths including how families benefit from passionate, knowledgeable and dedicated frontline workers, did conclude that a written statement of action was required for five areas of improvement. A further inspection took place in September 2022 and found sufficient improvements in four of the five areas. An Accelerated Progress Plan (APP) was implemented to continue improvement in the fifth area. In October 2024 DfE and CQC monitoring of the Accelerated Progress Plan was ended.

5.2 We are now in the window for our next SEND inspection which will be under the new SEND Inspection Framework introduced in January 2023 (Appendix 1). The inspection involves the local area's partnership; education health, social care and partners who support children and young people with SEND 0 – 25 as covered by the SEND code of practice including those with an EHCP or SEN support plan.

5.3 The inspection framework asks two overarching questions:

- How do children, young people and their families experience the SEND arrangements in Stockport?
- What impact do Stockport's SEND arrangements have on outcomes for children and young people with SEND and their families?

- 5.4 This means Inspectors will be asking whether children and young people have 'typically positive' experiences of education health and social care, and if they do what is it that is working well, and where experiences are less positive why is this and what needs to be improved?
- 5.6 When exploring the impact on outcomes inspectors are looking at whether children and young people:
- have their need's accurately identified and assessed in timely and effective ways.
 - participate in decision making about their individual plans for support
 - receive the right help at the right time
 - are well prepared for their next step and supported to achieve strong outcomes
 - are valued, visible and included in their community.
- 5.7 To answer these questions Inspectors are considering
- How effective are Stockport's arrangements for children and young people with (SEND)?
 - How well do leaders and partners work together to plan, evaluate, develop and deliver the SEND system in Stockport.
 - What is it like to be a child or young person with SEND and their parent carer in Stockport?
 - What is the Stockport's SEND partnership doing well?
 - What needs to be improved?
 - What plans are there in place to achieve this?
- 5.8 Through a range of inspection activity including hearing the views and perspectives of children, young people, their parent carers, as well as Stockport frontline practitioner's, decision makers and senior leaders, inspectors will reach one of three possible outcome judgements.
- 5.9 Outcome 1: "The local area partnership's SEND arrangements typically lead to positive experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND. The local area partnership is taking action where improvements are needed."

This means that inspectors Judge that children and young people typically achieve strong outcomes and have typically positive experiences of their education, health and care. The local area has identified any areas for improvement and is taking effective action to address them and there are no areas for priority action. The next full SEND inspection is within 5 years and the local area partnership updates and publishes it's strategic plan based on the inspection recommendations.

- 5.10 Outcome 2: "The local area partnership's arrangements lead to inconsistent experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND. The local partnership must work jointly to make improvements."

This means that inspectors judge that any of the points in outcome 1 are not met but there are no areas for priority actions. The next full area SEND inspection is within 3 years and the local area partnership updates and publishes its strategic plan based on inspection recommendations.

5.11 Outcome 3: "There are widespread and/or systemic failings leading to significant concerns about the experiences and outcomes of children and young people with SEND, which the local area partnership must address urgently."

This means inspectors have identified one or more areas for priority action, that there are significant concerns about the experiences and outcomes of children and young people because of particular systemic or widespread failings that have a significant impact on children and young people's experiences and outcomes.

Following this Judgement there is a monitoring Inspection within 18 months, a full SEND inspection within 3 years and HMCI requires the local area to prepare and submit a priority action plan (area SEND) to address the identified areas for priority action.

5.12 There are currently 53 published SEND inspection reports under the new framework, from 1 January 2023 to 17 February 2025.

Outcome 1	Typically positive experiences and outcomes	13	25%
Outcome 2	Inconsistent experiences and outcomes	26	49%
Outcome 3	Widespread and/or systemic failings	14	26%

The most frequent outcome is the second, or middle, judgement where experiences and outcomes are inconsistent but there are effective improvement plans in place to address them.

5.13 Across all three outcomes there are national themes about the challenges of ever rising demand for SEND services across education health and social care that is creating pressure within services capacity, which is causing children and families to often wait too long for assessments of their needs and the help they need. A common theme is too long waiting times for health assessments such as Autism diagnosis.

5.14 Areas with outcomes 1 and 2 evidence their collective understanding about the challenges in the system that are impacting upon children and families, and that the improvement plans to address these challenges are suitable and being acted upon. Outcome 1 areas are able to evidence the impact of their improvement plans leading to more consistent experiences and outcomes for children, young people and their families.

5.15 We are working hard to be ready for SEND inspection. We have embedded in practice the improvements from the previous SEND strategy. There is good evidence of positive impact on experiences and outcomes for many children and young people, but we want this to be more consistent.

5.16 In Autumn 2024 each service area within Stockport's SEND partnership undertook a self-evaluation exercise against the inspection criteria to evidence the positive impacts we are having and to seek assurance that we understand where improvements are needed in our arrangements, and that our plans for continuous improvement are the right ones to deliver the required impact.

5.17 Last month Senior Officers (Council and Health) and colleagues from PACTS met with Ofsted for a SEND Engagement Meeting, this is part of our Annual Engagement process. We presented an up-to-date version of our Self Evaluation.

5.18 Our self evaluation notes that there is a lot to celebrate. Many children and young people with SEND have good experiences and outcomes in Stockport. The evidence for this includes:

- Key stage attainment has improved
- attendance has improved
- exclusions have reduced
- 600+ more resource and special school places
- local authority commissioned alternative provision is rated as good or outstanding by Ofsted.
- the first in GM to establish the balanced system for SALT and feedback is positive.
- We have established family hubs, to add to the well-established support offers from start well, family help and social care.
- Our SEND Local Offer website has been updated and is improving meaning it is more accessible for families.

5.19 However we have listened to our children, young people and their families and they have told us there are still things we need to improve:

- Children and Young People often wait too long for assessments and diagnosis (Autism diagnosis and CAMHS assessments).
- We need to improve the support offer while waiting for health assessments and diagnosis.
- Families wait too long for their child's EHCP to be finalised.
- Some families are unhappy that their named school is not the one they want.
- Where there are long waits, the communication between the service and the family needs to improve.
- There can sometimes be a 'cliff edge' between services where there is a transition based on a child or young person's age. Earlier planning to enable a seamless receipt of service and provision would help improve this and reduce worry, frustration and some needs escalating.

5.20 Our plans to improve the experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND are clearly set out in the refreshed SEND strategy which sets out the current priorities in the three highest areas of need, Social Emotional Mental Health (SEMH), Autism and Neurodiversity, Speech and Language communication needs.

5.21 There are two key cross cutting themes. Firstly, the focus on improving the timeliness of assessment and diagnosis. A key part of this is ensuring that those that are waiting are 'waiting well' and that this is underpinned by clear communication. Secondly, the ambition to develop and promote our early help ambition so that children's education, health and social care needs are identified and met at the earliest point.

5.22 We have detailed improvement plans that are being progressed including for:

- EHCP recovery plan - timeliness and communication
- Health diagnostic waiting times – needs led Neurodevelopmental offer, Therapies and the Balanced System
- Mental Health and Wellbeing
- Success at SEN support
- SEND sufficiency plan - SEMH and Autism focus
- Attendance Strategy and multiagency leadership oversight of arrangements to improve school attendance, including for SEND learners

- Leadership oversight of the effectiveness, progress and outcomes for LA commissioned Alternative Provision
- Preparing for adulthood and transition between services
- Strengthening our Quality Assurance Framework

5.23 Given where we are on our improvement journey we know that there are inconsistencies of experience and outcomes. Our continued commitment to improvement is driven by our ambition to be more consistent and deliver even better experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND and their families in Stockport.

6. FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

6.1 As outlined earlier the DSG funding is currently over-spending year-on-year due to ongoing/increasing demand, low level funding and despite increases in local specialist capacity we still have a large number of pupils accessing education and meeting needs of their EHCP via high-cost external placements. If the pending inspection was to identify any areas of concern / risks that required additional investment, this would potentially place the councils MTFP and DSG budget spend levels under further pressure.

7. LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

7.1 The Local Authority has the statutory duty to provide the provision referred to in this report.

8. HR CONSIDERATIONS

8.1 There are no HR considerations.

9. EQUALITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT

9.1 There are no environmental considerations

9.2 The SEND improvement work and service delivery is in line with the Council's Equality objectives.

10. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

10.1 The scrutiny committee is asked to:

- Note the continued pressure of demand on resources and impact for families
- Note improvement activity and positive progress to date
- Note the position relating to SEND inspection preparation and possible outcomes.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Appendix 1

New inspection framework 2023 : [Area SEND inspections: framework and handbook - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/new-inspection-framework-2023-area-send-inspections-framework-and-handbook)