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Cath McEvoy-Carr  
Executive Director of Adult Social Care and Children's Services  
Northumberland County Council  
County Hall  
Morpeth  
Northumberland  
NE61 2EF

Siobhan Brown, Chief Operating Officer, Northumberland Clinical Commissioning Group  
Sam Barron, Local Area Nominated Officer, Strategic SEND Lead

Dear Mrs McEvoy-Carr and Ms Brown

### **Joint local area SEND revisit in Northumberland**

Between 19 and 21 May 2021, Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) revisited the local area of Northumberland to decide whether sufficient progress has been made in addressing each of the areas of significant weakness detailed in the written statement of action issued on 29 November 2018.

As a result of the findings of the initial inspection and in accordance with the Children Act 2004 (Joint Area Reviews) Regulations 2015, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI) determined that a written statement of action was required because of significant areas of weakness in the local area's practice. HMCI determined that the local authority and the area's clinical commissioning group (CCG) were jointly responsible for submitting the written statement to Ofsted. This was declared fit for purpose on 18 March 2019.

**The area has made sufficient progress in addressing the three areas of significant weakness identified at the initial inspection. This letter outlines our findings from the revisit.**

The inspection was led by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors from Ofsted and a Children's Services Inspector from CQC.

Inspectors spoke with parents and carers of children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) and met with local authority and

National Health Service (NHS) officers. They spoke with frontline practitioners from education, health and care services in the area and reviewed a range of performance data and information, including the area's SEND strategy, self-evaluation, joint commissioning strategy and outcomes framework.

Inspectors reviewed a sample of education, health and care (EHC) plans, as well as education, health and care advices relating to these plans. Inspectors considered 558 responses to the online survey for parents and carers.

## Main findings

- At the initial inspection, inspectors found the following:

### **There were weaknesses in the local area's arrangements for jointly planning, commissioning and providing the services children and young people with SEND and their families need.**

There has been significant improvement and a seismic change in leadership and culture since Northumberland's last area SEND inspection in October 2018. Practitioners no longer work in silos. They work collegiately to implement the requirements of 2014 SEND reforms. The partnership has reviewed and revitalised its strategy for children and young people with SEND.

Leaders acknowledge that, at the time of the last inspection, they did not have a clear understanding of joint commissioning. This has now changed. Joint commissioning fully involves the parent and carer forum and is embedded firmly across all aspects of education, health and social care. An example of effective joint commissioning is the provision of online mental health and well-being communities for children and young people and staff in schools.

EHC assessment and planning have improved since October 2018. Members of the parent and carer forum help to check the quality of EHC plans on a monthly basis. The voices of parents, carers, children and young people now feature strongly in plans. Information from health practitioners is included and integrated well. More recently, using a screening tool for all children and young people undergoing assessment, information has been included routinely from social care.

The capacity of the workforce has increased. For example, following a successful mental health 'trailblazer' project, leaders have invested in additional mental health specialists in schools. More children and young people are being referred to these specialists. Pleasingly, the average waiting time for all children and young people, including those with SEND, referred to children and young people's mental health services has more than halved in the last two years. It is now, on average, under four weeks.

Leaders acknowledge that there is more to do to improve the accessibility of the online local offer. Although improvements have been made, too many parents and carers of children and young people with SEND remain unaware

of its existence. Those who do know about the local offer acknowledge its usefulness but find it difficult to navigate. Overall, communication needs to improve if practitioners are to win over the hearts and minds of the parents and carers of children and young people with SEND in Northumberland.

**The area has made sufficient progress in addressing this area of significant weakness.**

- At the initial inspection, inspectors found the following:

**There were inconsistencies in the graduated approach to identifying, assessing and meeting the needs of children and young people with SEND in mainstream primary and secondary schools.**

Special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) in schools now understand the graduated approach to meeting the needs of children and young people with SEND. Following area-wide training, this approach to identifying, assessing and meeting the needs of children and young people with SEND is also understood and used consistently by education, health and care practitioners. As a result, children and young people with SEND are now referred to support services in a more timely manner. For example, across the local area, early help referrals doubled between 2018/19 and 2019/20.

Information-sharing between education, health and social care has improved. For example, health visitors and early years practitioners now share information in a more coordinated way. This ensures a more rapid response to identifying additional needs. Many more practitioners now understand the pathways into support services. For example, they know how and when to refer children and young people to children and young people's mental health services.

SEND champions have been appointed to work within social care teams. They help raise awareness about the importance of early identification of children and young people with SEND by social workers. Referrals are made to multi-agency teams who are ensuring that children and young people's needs are met and their outcomes are improving.

Practitioners have worked in partnership to co-produce a new outcomes framework. This outcomes framework is beginning to impact positively on the provision for children and young people with SEND and their families. SENCOs discuss important non-academic outcomes with children and young people with SEND and their families more regularly now. This needs to improve further, especially in relation to preparing young people for adulthood.

The local area's work is supported well by a newly formed, strong and challenging parent and carer forum. For example, they are supporting the ongoing work with practitioners to improve the identification of autism spectrum disorder in girls.

Practitioners, parents, carers and members of the parent and carer forum are especially pleased that central services, such as advice from specialist

teachers in speech, language and communication for children and young people with SEND, are now allocated on a needs-assessed basis. Access times to these services have improved since October 2018.

Some improvements have been made to ensure an equitable offer of services across the county. However, Northumberland is a large local area geographically. Some parents and carers in the north and the west of the county remain unhappy with the provision of services for their children. Leaders know that there is more to do to improve access to SEND services in parts of the county.

**The area has made sufficient progress in addressing this area of significant weakness.**

- At the initial inspection, inspectors found the following:

**Poor outcomes were achieved by children and young people with SEND and there were weaknesses in successfully preparing them for their adult lives.**

Academic outcomes for children and young people with SEND are improving. However, leaders are not satisfied with the rate of improvement. They acknowledge that the gap between the outcomes for children and young people with and without SEND remains too wide in Northumberland. Other outcomes are improving too. For example, fewer children and young people with SEND are being excluded from school. None with an EHC plan have been permanently excluded over a three-year period. Leaders recognise the need for more extra-curricular activities for children and young people with SEND and their families, especially at weekends and during holiday times. As a parent commented in the online survey for parents and carers, 'Just please keep on being proactive. As a parent, I can only achieve so much without external support.'

The co-produced 'Growing Up in Northumberland' guide provides information for young people with SEND and their families about how to prepare for adulthood. This helpful publication aids planning for the future and, where possible, independence. Leaders have also developed innovative practice in providing supported internships and apprenticeships with employers within Northumberland. Although celebrating these pieces of work, leaders acknowledge that there is work still to be done to prepare young people with SEND for adulthood consistently well in Northumberland. Too many young people with SEND aged 17 and 19 are not in education, employment or training.

Leaders recognise the importance of early identification of need and improved outcomes for children and young people with SEND. An example of effective practice is the additional pre-school check for five-year-olds by health visitors which identifies children who might require additional support in a timely manner.

**The area has made significant progress in addressing this area of significant weakness.**

As the area has made sufficient progress in addressing all the significant weaknesses, the formal quarterly support and challenge visits from the Department for Education and NHS England will cease.

Yours sincerely

Belita Scott  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

<b>Ofsted</b>	<b>Care Quality Commission</b>
Emma Ing HMI Regional Director	Victoria Watkins Deputy Chief Inspector, Primary Medical Services, Children Health and Justice
Belita Scott HMI Lead Inspector	Daniel Carrick CQC Inspector

cc: Department for Education  
Clinical commissioning group  
Director Public Health for the local area  
Department of Health  
NHS England