

Children & Young People's Overview & Scrutiny Committee

7 January 2025

Area SEND Inspection of County Durham's Local Area Partnership



Report of John Pearce, Director of Children's Services

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

Purpose of the Report

- 1 To provide the findings of the recent Special Education Needs and Disability (SEND) inspection of Durham's local area partnership and subsequent action plan.

Executive Summary

- 2 The County Council is jointly responsible with the Integrated Care Board for the planning and commissioning of services for Children and Young People with SEND from 0 to age 25.
- 3 There was an inspection by the Care Quality Commission (CQC) and the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) in June 2024.
- 4 Overall, the inspection reflected the strengths and areas for improvement partners knew about locally. Officers across the local SEND system felt that it reflected well the detail and the findings of the comprehensive local self-evaluation we had completed and shared in Spring 2024, prior to the inspectors calling.
- 5 The area partnership's inspection outcome report was published on 03 September 2024 and the headline outcome was that our current arrangements lead to 'inconsistent experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND.
- 6 Following publication of the report, the local area was required to update its SEND strategic plan within 35 working days of receiving the inspection report setting out how the partnership will address areas for improvement identified during inspection and listed in the report ensuring required improvements integrate with existing plans.

- 7 The strategic action plan has been co-produced with the local area partnership and was published in mid-October. It demonstrates the intended impact of actions on the lives of children and young people with SEND and their families.

Recommendation(s)

- 8 It is recommended that the Children & Young People's Overview & Scrutiny Committee:
- a) Note the findings of the Special Education Needs / Disability (SEND) inspection of Durham's local area partnership; and,
 - b) Note and comment on the partnership's action plan to drive forward the recommended areas for further improvement from the inspection report.

Background

- 9 The purpose of the inspection of the local area arrangements for children and young people with SEND is to provide an independent, external evaluation of the effectiveness of the local area partnership's arrangements for children and young people with SEND, and, where appropriate recommend what the Local Area Partnership (LAP) should do to improve the arrangements.
- 10 'Local area partnership' refers to those in education, health and care who are responsible for the strategic planning, commissioning, management, delivery, and evaluation of arrangements for children and young people with SEND who live in a local area.
- 11 Inspections evaluate arrangements for all children and young people with SEND aged 0 to 25 covered by the SEND code of practice, including those who have an education, health and care (EHC) plan and those who receive special educational needs (SEN) support.
- 12 When evaluating the local area partnership, inspectors focus mainly on how effectively the local authority and integrated care board (ICB) jointly plan, evaluate, and develop services for children and young people with SEND. However, they also consider the duties of other area partners, which are set out in the Children and Families Act 2014 and described further in the SEND code of practice.
- 13 The inspection considers whether local authorities' approach to commissioning and overseeing alternative provision arrangements for children and young people in the local authority area meets their duties as set out in section 19 of the Education Act 1996 and in statutory guidance.
- 14 There was a full SEND inspection of Durham's LAP conducted by the Care Quality Commission (CQC) and the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) in June 2024.
- 15 The inspectors had meetings with a range of relevant service leads, managers and practitioners across education health and care on key topics selected by them. These included:
 - a) Durham Context and Local Area Partnership's Self Evaluation.
 - b) Durham's Parent Carer Forum.
 - c) SENDIASS.
 - d) CYP including at The Croft around Anxious About School work and the eXtreme group.

- e) Strategy and Commissioning.
 - f) EHCPs – Quality and Decision-Making.
 - g) Local Education Partnership Chairs, Virtual School, and Alternative Provision.
 - h) Children's attendance, those missing or not attending, electively home educated and those on alternative packages of support.
 - i) Children with complex needs including those with a social worker, care leavers and those on the Dynamic Support Register.
 - j) Visits and discussions with family hubs, health teams, GPs, early years, primary, secondary, college and specialist school provision.
- 16 During the inspection, inspectors met with:
- a) Over 30 children and young people, 10 parents/carers.
 - b) Over 110 DCC councillors, leaders, managers, and officers (this includes staff in CYPS and integrated commissioning).
 - c) Around 95 NHS leaders, managers, and practitioners (including ICB and staff from 5 NHS Foundation Trusts).
 - d) Around 55 Heads, SENCOs and staff from schools, nurseries, and colleges across Durham.
 - e) Other partners including MCT parent carer forum, HumanKind and Investing in Children.
 - f) Inspectors published a survey for practitioners, parents and carers, children, and young people which we widely promoted. They received almost 1,500 responses in total which helped to shape the inspection findings.

Inspection findings

- 17 Following a full inspection, inspectors make an overall summary judgement about the local area partnership. This judgement reflects the inspectors' evaluation of the impact of the LAP's arrangements on the experiences and outcomes of children and young people with SEND.
- 18 A full inspection has three potential inspection outcomes (overall summary judgement):

- a) The LAP's 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.
 - b) The local area partnership's arrangements lead to inconsistent experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND. The local area partnership must work jointly to make improvements.
 - c) 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.
- 19 Overall, the inspection reflected the strengths and areas for improvement we knew about in the county. Officers across the local SEND system felt that it reflected well the detail and the findings of our comprehensive local self-evaluation we had completed and shared in Spring 2024, prior to the inspectors calling.
- 20 The area partnership's inspection outcome report (see appendix 2) was published on 03 September 2024 and the headline outcome was that our current arrangements lead to 'inconsistent experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND.
- 21 The report commented on some of our key strengths which included:
- a) Collaborative leadership being strong across education, health and social care and local leaders prioritise SEND.
 - b) Children and young people feel valued, visible, included in their communities, and listened to.
 - c) Children and young people build transferable skills so that they can participate in wider activities.
 - d) There is improvement in the length of time taken to complete new assessments the result of the recovery plan.
 - e) Most CYP have their needs identified and met early.
 - f) CYP with SEND have good attendance and this is improving further.
 - g) Persistent absence from school is reducing, preparing young people well in education, training, and employment.

- h) Parents and carers state that their voice is mostly heard well, some have seen improvements to support and services as a result.
- 22 Four areas for further improvement were identified by the inspectors and in doing so inspectors were keen to emphasise the framing of these in relation to continuing important areas of work that had already commenced. The four areas for improvement identified were that we should:
- a) Intensify work to further improve Education Health and Care (EHC) plan quality and assessment timeliness and ensure that EHC plans consistently and accurately reflect the needs of children and young people. It should ensure all partner agencies contribute comprehensively with high-quality information, and that all plans detail children and young people's voice and needs, aspirations, and next steps effectively.
 - b) Continue to strengthen its work to further reduce the delays to access CAMHS and neurodevelopmental pathways across the age range of children and young people.
 - c) Ensure that children and young people and their families can access easily identifiable needs-led services. Informed practitioners should direct families to services that provide support, guidance, and intervention at the earliest opportunity.
 - d) Further strengthen the monitoring and impact of strategic plans and policies to ensure that support and resources are consistently targeted to the children and young people and families that need it most.

Post inspection strategic local area partnership plan

- 23 Following publication of the inspection report, the local area is required to update its SEND strategic plan within 35 working days setting out how the partnership will address the key areas for improvement identified and ensuring required improvements integrate with existing plans.
- 24 Key stakeholders have co-produced the updated area strategic plan including representation from children and young people, parents and leaders from health, care, SEND teams, schools and other educational establishments. The updated plan demonstrates the intended impact of actions on the lives of children and young people with SEND and their families.
- 25 The Department for Education and National Health Service England monitor the LAPs progress against the updated plan on a six-monthly

basis and assess how effectively the local area is responding to the recommendations in the inspection report.

- 26 The next full area SEND inspection is then due to take place within approximately 3 years unless there are changes to the inspection framework during this time. We are also due to have annual engagement meetings with inspectors between inspections.
- 27 The plan was published on our SEND Local Offer website as requested and has been shared with members across our local partnership (see appendix 3 for action plan). From our partnership meeting in September, we also developed and agreed a public facing infographic contained within the plan to highlight the intended impact of our actions on the lives of children and young people with SEND and their families.
- 28 DfE and NHS colleagues have reviewed the plan and infographic and are content with the final version we have published. In addition, on 16 October 2024 we received a supportive letter from Janet Daby MP, Minister for Children and Families, about the inspection findings and the work we are doing.
- 29 The strategic action plan will be overseen by the SEND and AP Partnership Board with six monthly progress meetings also scheduled with DfE and NHS colleagues.

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

Ofsted and the CQC carry out joint inspections of local areas at the request of the Secretary of State for Education under section 20(1)(a) of the Children Act 2004.

Inspectors assess the extent to which the local area partners are complying with relevant legal duties relating to arrangements for children and young people with SEND. Relevant legal duties may include duties under the Children and Families Act 2014, the Equality Act 2010 and the Human Rights Act 1998.

When evaluating the local area partnership, inspectors focus mainly on how effectively the local authority and integrated care board (ICB) jointly plan, evaluate and develop services for children and young people with SEND. However, they also consider the duties of other area partners, which are set out in the Children and Families Act 2014 and described further in the SEND code of practice.

The actions described in this report are intended to comply with the requirements of the Department for Education and National Health Service England's requirements for updating the strategic plan and future monitoring requirements.

Finance

There are a range of financial implications on education, health and care services. Forecasts regarding the High Needs Block of the Dedicated Schools Grant (a key resource to support children and young people with additional needs) have been considered when formulating the action plan and implementing the actions contained within it.

Consultation

Key stakeholders have co-produced the updated area strategic plan including representation from children and young people, parents and leaders from health, schools and other educational establishments and demonstrates the intended impact of actions on the lives of children and young people with SEND and their families.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

The Equality Act 2010 details the requirement when taking decisions to have due regard to the need to advance equality of opportunity for people with protected characteristics, foster good relations between such groups and eliminate unlawful discrimination,

Climate Change

Through the wider SEND strategy, the LA seek wherever possible to support children and young people to attend local schools and provision, rather than travel to provision which is further away or out of county

Human Rights

None

Crime and Disorder

A disproportionately high number of young people and children who commit crime and / or disorder have SEND. Through programmes of work we aim to support children and young people with SEND in achieving their best outcomes in life. Early intervention and support for children and young people with SEND and inclusion needs, should have a positive impact on crime and disorder by helping to prevent offending and / or reoffending.

Staffing

A range of staff across education, health and care services support children and young people with their additional needs up to the age of 25.

Accommodation

None.

Risk

There are several areas of ongoing risk and mitigations including risks regarding recent sustained increases in demand for additional EHCPs and capacity issues in the system along with risks regarding demand on resources and the forecast funding expected to be available in coming years.

Procurement

Commissioning and procurement implications are considered for each strand of work related to SEND more widely, and there is a multi-agency SEND commissioning group to support integrated commissioning activity.

Area SEND inspection of Durham Local Area Partnership

Inspection dates: 24 to 28 June 2024

Dates of previous inspections: 22 to 24 January 2020

Inspection outcome

The local area partnership's arrangements lead to inconsistent experiences and outcomes for children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). The local area partnership must work jointly to make improvements.

The next full area SEND inspection will be within approximately 3 years.

Ofsted and CQC ask that the local area partnership updates and publishes its strategic plan based on the recommendations set out in this report.

Information about the local area partnership

Since the previous inspection in January 2020, there have been changes to the governance structure across the local area partnership (LAP). These include new governance appointments and the implementation of the Integrated Strategic Commissioning Team in 2020.

The commissioning of health services changed across England in 2022. At this time, the responsibility for health services in Durham passed to the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (ICB). Durham County Council and the North East and North Cumbria ICB are jointly responsible for the planning and commissioning of services for children and young people with SEND in Durham.

Durham County Council commissions alternative provision (AP) for permanently excluded pupils, those identified as close to permanent exclusion and those who cannot attend school because of health needs. There is one pupil referral unit that provides support across separate sites for pupils in key stage 1 to key stage 4. Four registered alternative education providers add

additional capacity for children and young people who need support away from mainstream education. A small number of children and young people who are unwell attend an education health care needs unit. Some school-age children with SEND attend places in additionally resourced mainstream settings.

What is it like to be a child or young person with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) in this area?

Children and young people with SEND experience variable quality of assessment and inconsistent support to meet their education, health and social care needs. The LAP is ambitious for children and young people with SEND, and some partnership work is well embedded. However, there is variability in the effectiveness of some services to swiftly identify and meet children and young people's needs.

For many children and young people, the overall quality and timeliness in issuing their education, health and care (EHC) plans, and their use across services, is inconsistent. New EHC plan assessments are seeing a reduction in waiting times, and the LAP is implementing recovery plans to tackle the existing backlog of EHC plan assessments. This includes investment in additional educational psychology capacity to further reduce assessment waiting times. Children and young people typically give professionals their views during direct work with them. However, their views and aspirations do not routinely feature in their EHC plans. In addition, some assessment information is historic, and some professionals' views are not consistently included in EHC plans. Generally, children and young people's EHC plans do not link consistently well to other support plans that they may have. This includes social care plans for children in need of help and protection and children in care. Some health practitioners are not aware that the children and young people they support have EHC plans or SEND support plans in school.

The LAP identifies and meets the needs of most children and young people with SEND early. However, for some, the lack of early assessment, identification of needs and subsequent access to the right support has led to disengagement, suspensions and exclusion from school. This is most evident as they transition from primary to secondary school. To support children and young people, some mainstream schools have additionally resourced provision. This helps to keep children and young people with SEND in their local primary and secondary schools. The LAP strategy to increase capacity to

meet demand for places in AP and special schools is not consistently clear. However, when children and young people attend these settings, their needs are assessed effectively, and they quickly receive the support they need.

In this area, children and young people with SEND largely have good attendance at school and further education. Over time, their attendance is improving and closely matches the typical attendance for individuals with similar additional needs in England. The number of children and young people who are persistently absent from education is decreasing. This prepares them well for next steps in education, employment or training. Young people are supported in future planning effectively. They receive useful information, advice and guidance for their next steps. Practitioners create detailed assessments that inform an individual's transition arrangements. They coordinate links with social care for post-16 care packages to meet children and young people's needs as they move into adulthood.

Parents and carers state that their voice is mostly heard well. Some parents and carers have seen a positive improvement in the support and services that their children receive because of the issues they raise. Children and young people feel valued, visible and included in their communities. They feel listened to by adults, but they would like more face-to-face opportunities to share their views. Many children and young people access youth clubs during the week and at weekends. They make their voice heard through the eXtreme Group and receive effective support through community hubs such as the Sjøvoll Centre. These successfully bring children and young people with SEND together to make new friends and develop their confidence. Children and young people build transferable skills so that they can participate in wider activities. For example, they visit places in Durham to participate in a range of indoor and outdoor experiences through integrating. This provides helpful short-break support for parents and carers.

What is the area partnership doing that is effective?

- Collaborative leadership is strong across education, health and social care. LAP leaders prioritise SEND. For example, the LAP has jointly commissioned specialist roles such as a designated social care officer, a designated clinical officer and a project leader for SEND. This is a strength of the LAP work.
- The focus on early identification of need is a positive initiative across Durham, with several arrangements in place to provide support for families and schools to help recognise and meet SEND needs. Fifteen family hubs throughout the area host drop-in sessions run by the Special Educational

Needs and Disabilities Information and Advice Support Service (SENDIASS) and educational psychologists. Additionally, there are courses run by the family hubs, health staff and specialist inclusion support teams, including the Durham Portage Service. They provide regular access to professional support and guidance. Each hub has sensory spaces and offers additional outreach support for families. This support is highly valued by parents and carers.

- The Healthy Child Programme is delivered effectively. The 0-25 service delivers additional developmental checks to identify additional needs and offer support at the earliest opportunity. Two-year-old checks are integrated with early years providers whenever a child attends a setting. Dedicated and knowledgeable staff offer a range of support and interventions to support younger children.
- All therapy services offer open referral systems. This means children and young people and their families can access support directly. Waiting times for therapy services in Durham vary. However, the most urgent needs are prioritised. Children and young people and their families can access support while waiting, and their therapeutic needs are assessed accurately in a timely way.
- Schools and further education providers can access a range of guidance to support and develop children and young people. This includes support for emotional resilience and mental health, although there is a variable uptake of this offer. Children and young people can self-refer to the emotional resilience team. This team offers effective emotional well-being support to children and young people. Equally, children and young people with SEND are well prepared for next steps in education, employment and training through DurhamWorks and DurhamEnable.
- The children with disabilities social care team conducts thorough assessments of disabled children's needs. Children have their needs quickly and accurately identified. For example, social workers identify any needs arising from disability or environmental issues, and when needs are identified, social workers make prompt referrals to services and ensure support is quickly put in place. Specialist services are brought into holistic planning as needed.
- Children and young people with complex medical needs access continuous support through the complex care nursing team. There is strong multi-agency working, and services are responsive to these individuals' needs.

Residential placements for children in care are selected to ensure their SEND needs are met well.

- Across education, health and social care, planning for post-18 support for children and young people with complex SEND starts early. This ensures that there are no gaps or delays in the support and care that individuals receive. Detailed assessments inform transition arrangements and future care packages. These support an individual's needs as they move into adulthood.
- Early help workers and children with disabilities social workers are knowledgeable about the support available to children and young people and their families. Navigation workers ensure that support features in young people's future planning and continues into adulthood. For example, planning to support children with SEND as they approach adulthood starts when they become 14 years old. Navigation workers complete Care Act assessments and capacity assessments as needed. This ensures that young people who need continuing care and support from adult services post-18 have their care packages agreed in advance.
- The virtual school operates through a multi-disciplinary approach across education, health and social care. The LAP has invested in staffing capacity to support children who are in care and have SEND. This includes a dedicated educational psychologist.
- The LAP prioritises co-production. Children, young people and their families are represented at the Health and Wellbeing Board. They make frequent contributions locally through the Making Changes Together parent carer forum and the eXtreme Group. For example, children and young people have shared their experiences of the use of language around autism to inform guidance for professionals.
- Access to support and AP is supported effectively through four secondary school inclusion partnerships that support local area needs. Similarly, primary schools share their own inclusion partnership arrangements. The LAP has well-thought-out quality assurance processes to ensure AP providers meet LAP standards. The LAP has oversight of children and young people placed in AP. The provision is flexible to meet a range of demands, including day six provision. All movements in and out of AP are monitored by the LAP.

What does the area partnership need to do better?

- Children and young people in Durham wait too long for neurodevelopmental assessments. In addition, some individuals experience lengthy waits for therapeutic support from child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). This mirrors the national picture. Swift support may only be available at crisis point. The most vulnerable children and young people do not routinely benefit from accelerated neurodevelopmental assessments when needed. However, there is new investment and a detailed recovery plan from the LAP and Durham executive leaders to reduce waiting times for assessments and support.
- Schools generally identify children and young people's SEND at the earliest opportunity. However, for some individuals, the lack of early assessment of needs has led to parents and carers feeling that they need to make requests for EHC plan assessments to secure support for their child.
- The needs-led offer supports children and young people and their families while they are waiting for diagnostic assessment. However, practitioners' general understanding of this offer is inconsistent, and some are unclear of what support is available. The LAP has a comprehensive workforce development plan to improve practitioners' understanding of what support is available. The impact of this plan is too early to evaluate.
- Multi-agency groups audit EHC plans. Groups are well represented, and learning is shared across the LAP. However, learning from these audits has not consistently had a positive impact to improve the quality of EHC plans.
- The monitoring of the impact of new LAP strategic plans and policies that target support and resources is developing. However, some evaluation work to improve multi-agency support and provision for children and young people with SEND is carried out independently rather than jointly across agencies. This lessens its impact to improve multi-agency work.
- Children and young people's views are typically sought during direct work with them. However, their wishes and aspirations do not routinely feature in their EHC plans. This means that planning across education, health and social care is not always informed by what children and young people want to happen and how they feel.
- Children and young people with less complex SEND, who are working with social workers other than the children with disabilities team, receive inconsistent support. Their individual wider needs are not consistently recognised alongside their SEND in professionals' planning, for example the

impact of neglect. As a result, some support offered may not be consistently appropriate or accessible.

- Occasionally, some services label children and young people and their families as 'hard to engage'. This leads to a lack of creative and innovative thinking to make services more appealing and accessible to children and young people and their families. The effect of some professionals' language has a negative impact on how some services engage with families. As a result, some services withdraw support through lack of engagement.
- The availability of specialist equipment in schools is an emerging challenge. Equipment is available locally, but some children and young people do not consistently benefit from its use. The LAP has plans to maximise the use of existing equipment across schools to ensure children receive the support they need to access education. The impact of these plans is too early to evaluate.
- Parents and carers describe their frustrations with the usefulness of the local offer website. They acknowledge that many services and support systems exist, but users of the website cannot easily find them. As a result, some children and young people miss opportunities, adding to parents and carers' frustration.
- Preparation for adulthood across health services is variable. Different services follow a variety of service specifications. These state different ages to access a range of adult services. As a result, some services provide support at contrasting times. For example, children and young people aged between 16 and 25 who are supported by the dynamic support register and are open to a range of services do not consistently receive coordinated multi-agency support.

Areas for improvement

Areas for improvement
The LAP should intensify its work to further improve EHC plan quality and assessment timeliness. It should ensure that EHC plans consistently and accurately reflect the needs of children and young people. It should ensure that all partner agencies contribute comprehensively with high-quality information and that all plans detail children and young people's voice, needs, aspirations and next steps effectively.
The LAP should continue to strengthen its work to further reduce the delays in accessing CAMHS and neurodevelopmental pathways across the age range of children and young people.

The LAP should ensure that children and young people and their families can access easily identifiable needs-led services. Informed practitioners should direct families to services that provide support, guidance and intervention at the earliest opportunity.

The LAP should further strengthen the monitoring and impact of strategic plans and policies to ensure that support and resources are consistently targeted to the children and young people and families that need it most.

Local area partnership details

Local authority	Integrated care board
Durham County Council	North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board
John Pearce Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services	Samantha Allen Chief Executive of the Integrated Care Board
www.durham.gov.uk	https://northeastnorthcumbria.nhs.uk
County Hall, Durham DH1 5UJ	Parkhouse Building, Baron Way, Kingmoor Park, Cumbria CA6 4SJ

Information about this inspection

This inspection was carried out at the request of the Secretary of State for Education under section 20(1)(a) of the Children Act 2004.

The inspection was led by one of His Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) from Ofsted, with a team of inspectors including: one social care HMI and one Ofsted Inspector from education; a lead Children's Services Inspector from the Care Quality Commission (CQC); and two Children's Services Inspectors from the CQC.

Inspection team

Ofsted

David Mills, Ofsted HMI lead inspector
Kathryn Grindrod, Ofsted HMI
Angela Spencer-Brooke, Ofsted Inspector

Care Quality Commission

Jessica Taylor-Beirne, CQC lead inspector
Louise Holland, CQC inspector
Natalie Palmer, CQC inspector

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Appendix 3: SEND Action Plan



Durham Local Area SEND Partnership Action Plan

15 October 2024



How our partnership will help us further improve SEND support in County Durham

We will build on how we monitor our partnership progress and ensure that we target support to those who need it most

4

We will make it easier for people to find and get help and support quickly. We will also offer more resources for those working in education, health, and care to make this happen

3

We will provide help quickly in a joined-up way, based on children and young people's needs

2

Across education, health, and care, we will try and ensure that assessments and plans are consistently high quality so that children's needs are well understood and met

1



AFI1 The local area partnership should intensify its work to further improve EHC plan quality and assessment timeliness. It should ensure that EHC plans consistently and accurately reflect the needs of children and young people. It should ensure all partner agencies contribute comprehensively with high-quality information, and that all plans detail children and young people's voice and needs, aspirations, and next steps effectively.

AFI Lead: Paul Shadforth

AFI Workstream membership: DCO, DSCO, Lisa S, SC rep, ICB rep, Ed Psych, SEND Casework Managers, Schools reps (including Special Schools)

The work of AFI1 will follow 4 main themes:

- The development of a set of **needs assessment practice standards** for Education Health and Care contributors.
- A **workforce development** programme that supports the development of skills and knowledge that underpin practice standards.
- The development of **practice tools and guidance** that support effective practice in needs assessment.
- A **quality assurance framework** that identifies good practice and areas for development at practitioner, service and sector levels informing a cycle of continual improvement.



1.1 The development of a **set of needs assessment practice standards** for Education Health and Care contributors.

	Tasks	Task Lead	Start	Finish	Additional Resource Names	Evidence of Outcomes
1.1.1	<p>Identify and share good examples of EHCPs and the constituent advice that form it across the Local Area Partnership (LAP).</p> <p>Develop and implement a Local Area Partnership survey measuring self-reported confidence in advice writing.</p>	Strategic Manager SEND and Inclusion	November 2024	July 2025	<p>SEND Casework Managers</p> <p>DSCO DCO Quality Improvement Manager</p>	<p>EHCPs rated through multi agency audits as good or better:</p> <p>Year 1 (25/26) 80%.</p> <p>Year 2 (26/27) 90%.</p>
1.1.2	<p>Ensure that there is consistent revisiting advice for young people in year 5 (to prepare for year 6 / 7 transition) and in year 9 to prepare for Key stage 4 to 5 transition.</p>	SEND and Inclusion Service Managers	September 2025	September 2027	<p>SENCO Network</p> <p>Durham Association of Primary Heads</p> <p>Durham Association of Secondary Heads</p>	<p>EHCPs which are reviewed in transition years are rated through multi agency audits as good or better:</p> <p>Year 1 (25/26) 70%.</p> <p>Year 2 (26/27) 80%.</p> <p>Year 3 (27/28) 90%.</p>

Impact Overview: Across education, health, and care, ensuring assessments and plans are joined up and of a consistently high quality so that children’s needs are well understood and met.

See page 2: ‘How our partnership will help support improvements in SEND in County Durham – ACTION 1.’

1.2 A workforce development programme that supports the development of skills and knowledge that underpin practice standards.

	Tasks	Task Lead	Start	Finish	Additional Resource Names	Evidence of Outcomes
1.2.1	Refresh existing LAP workforce training and development programmes focussing on known shared areas for improvement.	Development and Learning Manager / Workforce and Development	January 2025	January 2026	SEND Advisory Officers, Senior EP, DSCO, DCO	Training and Development Programmes measure Impact on confidence in practice. Self-rated as good or better by participants (follow up to all who fall below).
1.2.2	Invitations and attendances to training programmes to be multi agency at all possible opportunities.	As above	January 2025	January 2026	SEND Advisory Officers, Senior EP, DSCO, DCO	As above

Impact Overview: We are offering more resources for those working in education, health, and care to make sure our work is joined up for children, young people and families and our workforce is upskilled to help families as much as possible.

See page 2: ‘How our partnership will help support improvements in SEND in County Durham – ACTION 1.’

1.3 The development of **practice tools and guidance** that support effective practice in needs assessment.

	Tasks	Task Lead	Start	Finish	Additional Resource Names	Evidence of Outcomes
1.3.1	Develop and implement guidance for practitioners that have expectations across health and care. This will include arrangements for multi-agency assessment and planning that involve guiding practitioners to liaise with schools about the status of SEND assessments and plans. This should inform new assessments and align with existing multi agency meeting arrangements.	Quality Improvement Manager	November 2024	September 2026	SEND Advisory Officers, Senior EP, DSCO, DCO	All advice(s) to be assured as good or better by providing agency. All plans to be assured as good or better.
1.3.2	Developing and using practice guidance across all advice givers and reviewers which prompts input into key areas of improvement (child/young person's voice).	Quality Improvement Manager	April 2025	September 2026	SEND Casework Managers, SEND Advisory Officers, Senior EP, DSCO, DCO	Annual feedback to be sought from across the Local Area Partnership on practice guidance and resource base content. Feedback to measure practice confidence and areas to develop more guidance and resource.

1.3.3	<p>Develop a resource base of universal assessment and engagement good practice guidance to support shared areas for improvement.</p> <p>Sources: County Durham children and young people Practice Toolkit (including voice of the child), Strengthening Families, Council for Disabled Children and NASEN.</p>	Quality Improvement Manager	November 2024	April 2025	SEND Advisory Officers, Senior EP, DSCO, DCO	As above.
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Impact Overview: Children and young people’s plans are informed by good quality advice(s). Standards of practice are in place and working well to make this happen consistently.

See page 2: ‘How our partnership will help support improvements in SEND in County Durham – ACTION 1.’

1.4A refreshed quality assurance framework that better identifies good practice and areas for development to support further multi agency practice improvement.

	Tasks	Task Lead	Start	Finish	Additional Resource Names	Evidence of Outcomes
1.4.1	Refresh the quality assurance framework across LAP based on shared improvement goals (including	Quality Improvement Manager	November 2024	September 2025		All multi agency audits to ensure that Child voice shapes in all

	capturing YP voice) providing recording and feedback tools.					good or better rated advice(s) and EHCPs.
1.4.2	<p>Extend the quality assurance framework - monitor and report on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • advice requested, • advice provided, • providing agencies own assurance of advice quality. 	Quality Improvement Manager	November 2024	September 2025		<p>Report on % of advice(s) provided in statutory time frame per agency.</p> <p>Establish improvement actions where advice is consistently provided late.</p>
1.4.3	Agency specific learning from multi-agency audits to be presented by the multi-agency audit chairperson to the specific agency and then the specific agency to provide a formal response in reply for presentation at LAP.	Strategic Manager SEND and Inclusion	April 2025	September 2027		As above.
1.4.4	Continue to implement, report, and review the Local Authority EHCP timeliness recovery programme.	Strategic Manager SEND and Inclusion	October 2024	September 2025		Timeliness to in line with the national average by Jan 2026.

Impact Overview: Children and young people’s voices inform good quality advice(s). EHCP timeliness is in line with national averages.

See page 2: ‘How our partnership will help support improvements in SEND in County Durham – ACTION 1.’

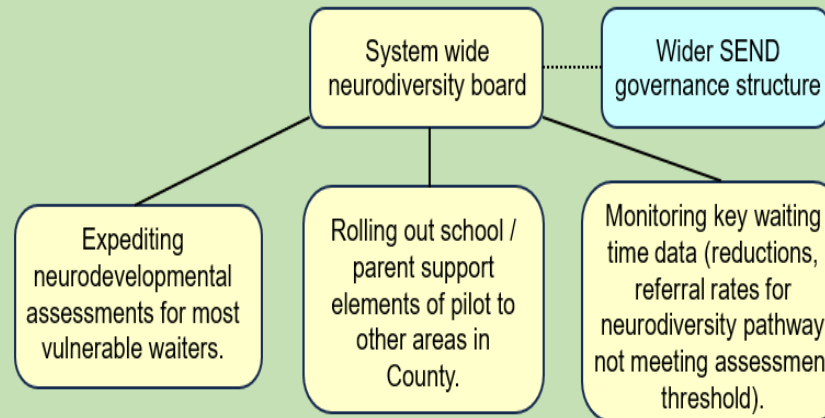
AFI2 The local area partnership should continue to strengthen its work to further reduce the delays to access CAMHS and neurodevelopmental pathways across the age range of children and young people.

AFI Lead: Jen Illingworth

AFI Workstream membership: Neurodiversity System Board

The work of this AFI will follow four main themes:

- Implementing **system wide neurodiversity board with aligned wider governance structures** across the Local Area Partnership (LAP).
- **Rolling out the school / parent support elements of the mental health support pilot** to other areas of the County.
- **Monitoring key waiting time data (CAMHS and Neurodiversity) for reductions and in referral rates for neurodiversity pathway who do not meet assessment threshold.**
- **Expediting neurodevelopmental assessments for most vulnerable waiters.**



2.1 Strengthening system wide oversight and governance arrangements across the LAP.

	Tasks	Task Lead	Start	Finish	Additional Resource Names	Evidence of Outcomes
2.1.1	Implement a new system wide Neurodiversity Board with aligned wider governance structures.	Director CYP Integrated Services	August 2024	October 2024	Commissioning and Development Support Officer	New system wide governance structure in place and effective.

Impact Overview: Governance systems ensure that the partnership is providing help to children, young people, and families in a joined-up way as quickly as possible.

See page 2: ‘How our partnership will help support improvements in SEND in County Durham – ACTION 2.’

2.2 Rolling out the school / parent support elements of the mental health support pilot to other areas of the County.

	Tasks	Task Lead	Start	Finish	Additional Resource Names	Evidence of Outcomes
2.2.1	Roll out the school/parent elements of the MH Support pilot from Consett to	Director CYP	August 2024	March 2026	Communication and Interaction Team	The neurodiversity in school aspects of the

	other parts of the County by area of highest referrals.	Integrated Services SEND and Inclusion Strategic Manager			Manager DCC/ Service Manager TEWV	Consett pilot are in place across the County. Teacher/parent/CYP feedback on this.
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Impact Overview: Children, young people, and families can access timely help and support in a joined-up way support and resources are consistently targeted to the children and young people and families that need it most.

See page 2: ‘How our partnership will help support improvements in SEND in County Durham – ACTIONS 2 and 4.’

2.3 Monitoring key waiting time data (CAMHS and Neurodiversity) for reductions and also in referral rates for CYP on to neurodiversity pathway who do not meet assessment threshold.

	Tasks	Task Lead	Start	Finish	Additional Resource Names	Evidence of Outcomes
2.3.1	Monitor data from neurodevelopmental pathway: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> referral rates, waiting times for initial assessment, initial assessments undertaken, waiting times for diagnostic assessment, 	Director Operations CAMHS / LD General Manager	October 2024	Ongoing	Service Manager TEWV/ Service Manager CDDFT	Reduction in % referral rates for those CYP who do not meet the initial assessment threshold.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> diagnostic assessments undertaken. 	Paediatrics CDDFT				<p>Reduction of waiting times (measured in weeks) of CYP waiting for diagnostic assessments.</p> <p>Parent/carer/CYP feedback on this.</p>
2.3.2	<p>Monitor data for generic CAMHS waiting times in TEWV compared to national averages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> referral rates, initial assessment undertaken, waiting times. 	Director Operations CAMHS / LD	October 2024	Ongoing	Service Manager TEWV	Waiting times demonstrated to be in line with national averages.

Impact Overview: We will provide help quickly and in a joined-up way based on children and young people's needs. We will do this by monitoring waiting times for CAMHS and Neurodiversity, reducing referral rates for those on neurodiversity pathway who do not meet assessment thresholds.

See page 2: 'How our partnership will help support improvements in SEND in County Durham – ACTION 2.'

2.4 Expediting neurodevelopmental assessments for most vulnerable waiters.

	Tasks	Task Lead	Start	Finish	Additional Resource Names	Evidence of Outcomes
2.4.1	Agree and roll out a process for expediting neurodevelopmental assessments for most vulnerable waiters.	Director Operations CAMHS / LD Practice Lead CYPS	July 2024	December 2024	Available within existing resource.	Agreed process in place with partners and vulnerable CYP have assessment process expedited.

Impact Overview: Assessing need as quickly as possible, particularly for those children and young people who are most vulnerable.

See page 2: 'How our partnership will help support improvements in SEND in County Durham – ACTIONS 2 and 4.'

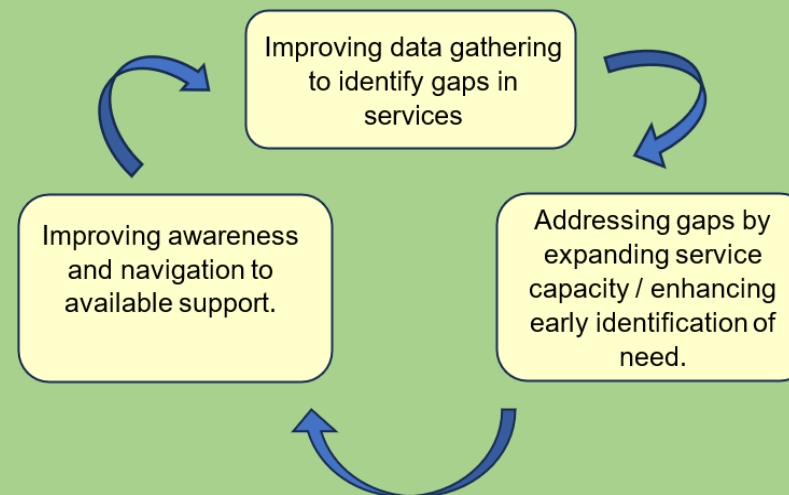
AFI3 The local area partnership should ensure that children and young people and their families can access easily identifiable needs-led services. Informed practitioners should direct families to services that provide support, guidance, and intervention at the earliest opportunity.

AFI Lead: Peter Mulholland/Bernie Toomey

AFI Workstream membership: Gail Earl, Paul Shadforth (or manager), Alison Ayres, Joanne Willey, Vicky Ferguson, Joanne Underwood, Anne-Marie Ollivere, David Wall, Judith Bowman, Jen Illingworth, CAMHS Jamie Bell/James Graham/Gillian Leckenby, Andrea Bell, Amy Black, Gayle Sumby, Caley Banks

The work of AFI3 will follow three key themes:

- **Improving data gathering** to better identify gaps in current services across the Partnership - Mapping the Gaps.
- **Addressing known gaps** by expanding service capacity and enhancing early identification of needs.
- **Improving awareness of and navigation** to available support.



3.1 Mapping gaps.

	Tasks	Task Lead	Start	Finish	Additional Resource Names	Evidence of Outcomes
3.1.1	Map the gaps in our current offer through gathering data from parents, young people, education settings, and service providers. Use this data to set an agenda for integrative and collaborative commissioning of support and services.	CYPS Strategic Manager, Strategy and Assurance Public health representative and ICB reps	When governance structure has been reviewed	Spring / summer 2025	Stakeholder representatives from group that conducts annual review of gaps.	Strategic plans include important information from yearly checks and explain how the system works and where to focus resources.

Impact Overview: Make sure everyone in the partnership knows what support may be missing or need strengthened and how to fix it using the governance group. Experiences of parents, young people, and key partner voices directly shape the partnership's priorities.

See page 2: 'How our partnership will help support improvements in SEND in County Durham – ACTIONS 3 and 4.'

3.2 Addressing gaps.

	Tasks	Task Lead	Start	Finish	Additional Resource Names	Evidence of Outcomes
3.2.1	Strengthen identification of early years SLC needs, sharing of key information between agencies, and links to appropriate intervention.	Communication / Interaction team leader Transformation Manager HDDFT Team Leader Cognition and Learning	November 2024	December 2026	Growing Little Voices Durham Strategy Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. % of 2 years olds have completed the ELIM or WellComm screening. Information Sharing Agreements resulting in this information being shared appropriately between agencies and settings. ii. Proportion of early years settings who have received WellComm training/ and using this.
3.2.2	Strengthen earlier identification and understanding of MLD, SLCN, SEMH and Neurodivergent Needs through: Core training and screening tools developed and made available to all education settings through the workforce development offer.	Team Leader Cognition and Learning	November 2024	Summer 2025	DBV 1 Oversight Group	Confidence of school-based staff who complete training and tools workshops to identify MLD, SLCN, SEMH and neurodivergent needs earlier, and address needs through the graduated approach;

						evidenced in assured SEND support plan.
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	Tasks	Task Lead	Start	Finish	Additional Resource Names	Evidence of Outcomes
3.2.3	Make sure all of our systems work in a similar way for helping children with SEND and that all schools have fair access to the support they need.	SEND and Inclusions Strategic Managers	November 2024	Summer 2025	DBV 2 Oversight Group; SIRB and related commissioning groups	Proportion of schools engaged with an identified core offer of needs-led support and advice available from Specialist SEND & Inclusion Support. Baselined and target to increase over time.
3.2.4	Inclusion Partnership resource allocation to work towards emphasis on earlier needs-led support that enables inclusion; and clarity on when AP is most appropriate. Ensure we have the right partners within the multi-agency arrangement.	Inclusion Co-ordinator SEND and Inclusion Support team Leader.	November 2024	December 2026	Supporting Inclusion in Durham Steering Group SIRB	Reduction in % of CYP experiencing suspension or exclusion who have not accessed appropriate assessment; and who do not have a well-developed

		Area Principal Educational Psychologist.				support plan aligned to need. Parent/carer feedback and confidence in mainstream school increases through the graduated and person-centred planning process.
3.2.5	Review and strengthen the enhanced transition protocols and associated support offer for secondary schools.	Lead Provision and Pastoral Support Area Principal Educational Psychologist SEND Team Manager	November 2024	December 2025	DBV 3 Oversight Group until summer 2025) Transitions Planning and Oversight Group	Reduction in number of CYP moving placement, EHE or EOTAS in Y7 and Y8.

	Tasks	Task Lead	Start	Finish	Additional Resource Names	Evidence of Outcomes
3.2.6	Identify schools that could make better use of the current support offer and help them understand how they could use the support better.	Early help Strategic Manager Public Health Representative	November 2024	Summer 2026	TAS Planning and Oversight Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Schools able to better understand and use wider support available. ii. Improved attendance and reduced suspension and exclusion of vulnerable pupils in target schools.

Impact Overview: We will make it easier for people to find and get help and support quickly. We will also offer more resources for those working in education, health, and care to make this happen with inclusion of children and young people at the heart. Parents and carers are fully involved in support planning, understanding, and feeling confident in the arrangements in place. Professionals recognise targeted areas of need early and address them effectively.

See page 2: 'How our partnership will help support improvements in SEND in County Durham – ACTION 3.'

3.3 Awareness raising and navigation to support.

	Tasks	Task Lead	Start	Finish	Additional Resource Names	Evidence of Outcomes
3.3.1	Review family hub SEND Offer and extend to all family hub settings.	Family Hub Development Manager Area principal educational psychologist Practice Lead, CYPS	September 2024	December 2025	Best Start in Life Group	Number of Family Hubs offering SEND drop-ins with key services; and parent/carer feedback on this.
3.3.2	Services to develop workforce development plans with a focus on understanding what other services do.	SEND quality Manager, Strategic Manger Early Help SEND and Inclusion Strategic Manager	September 2024	April 2025	Waiting Well Planning and Oversight Group	Number of services implementing workforce development plans to equip professionals to navigate families and young people to support.

		Development and Learning Manager				
3.3.3	Services to introduce navigation discussions to ensure families and young people are connected into the support they need.	SEND Quality Manager SEND and Inclusion Strategic Manager	September 2024	December 2025	Waiting Well Planning and Oversight Group	Proportion of Services routinely conducting Navigation discussions; and Parent/Carer feedback on this.

	Tasks	Task Lead	Start	Finish	Additional Resource Names	Evidence of Outcomes
3.3.4	School's portal and local offer content and format to be refreshed through coproduction process with parents/carers and schools.	SEND and Inclusion Strategic Manager Area Principal Education Psychologist.	September 2024	Summer 2025	Better SEND Communication Planning Group	% Parents/Carers and SENCOs reporting that they can find relevant information on services and support available feedback data.

3.3.5	SEND Champions across the partnership will help the local offer co-ordinator to maintain and update key information.	Designated Social Care Officer Making Changes Together Representative DCO for SEND	Summer 2025	Ongoing	Better SEND Communication Planning Group	Information held on Portal and Local Offer site is relevant and up to date- bi-annual QA process.
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Impact Overview: We will make it easier for people to find and get help and support quickly. Professionals are more confident in understanding the wider support offer available to families and are guiding parents/carers to these resources appropriately.

See page 2: ‘How our partnership will help support improvements in SEND in County Durham – ACTION 3.’

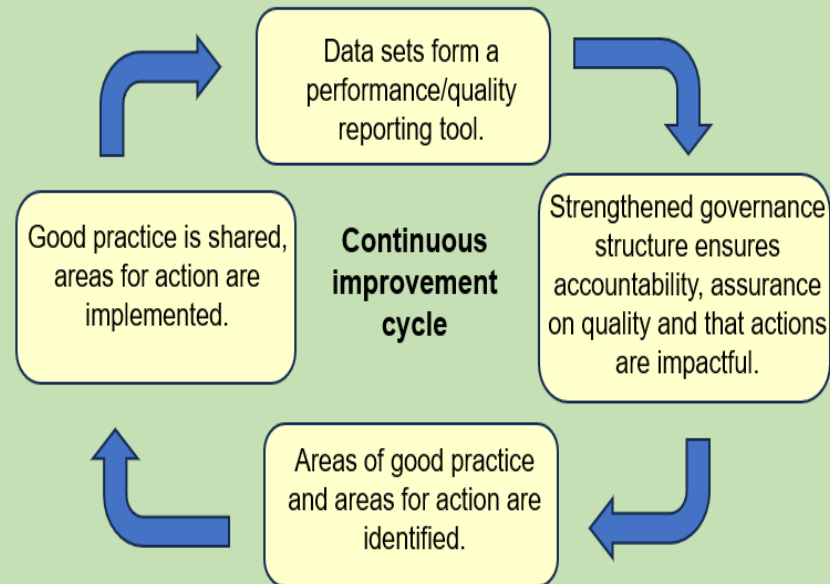
AFI4 The local area partnership should further strengthen the monitoring and impact of strategic plans and policies to ensure that support and resources are consistently targeted to the children and young people and families that need it most.

AFI Lead: Alison Ayres & Clare Nicholls

AFI Workstream membership: Bernie Toomey (CSC), Chris Horn (Education), Rachel Osbaldeston (PH), Chair DAPH, Angela Vear, Steven Wilson.

The work of Afi4 will follow 3 main themes:

- **Bringing together data sets into a single performance/quality reporting tool** across the partnership.
- **Review and strengthen governance structures** with clear terms of reference to ensure robust accountability, drive the implementation / delivery of the LAP action plan forward and ensure wider improvement work (including quality assurance) is impactful.
- **Build a continuous improvement feedback cycle** where regular communication informs an ongoing practice of course correction to help foster and sustain a high-performance culture.



4.1 Bringing together data sets into a single performance/quality reporting tool across the partnership.

	Tasks	Task Lead(s)	Start	Finish	Additional Resource Names	Evidence of Outcomes
4.1.1	Bringing together data sets (quantitative data held in Liquidlogic / Synergy and qualitative data from the new survey and data from the quality audit process) into a performance / quality reporting framework.	Strategic Manager Strategy and Assurance SEND and Inclusion Strategic Manager Commissioning delivery manager Practice Lead CYPS	November 2024	April 2024	Strategic Manager Education, Leadership Advisor Public Health DAPH, DASH representative Data systems team leader MCT & IIC Performance lead	Building on how the LAP monitor our partnership progress and ensuring that we target support to those who need it most. Monitoring and evaluation against practice standards, ensuring quality assurance framework is impactful.

4.1.2	Leveraging the council's new Business Intelligence platform to support this work through a range of new technologies, analytical tools and dashboard reporting to provide greater insight for the partnership (including views of partners, children, young people, and families).	As above	Spring 2025	Summer 2024	As above	As above.
4.1.3	Roll out dashboards for use by various governance groups, performance clinic and others.	As above	As soon as available	As above	As above	As above.

Impact Overview: We will build on how we monitor our partnership progress and ensure that we target support to those who need it most. This will involve bringing together data sets into a single performance / quality reporting tool and use of analytical tools to provide greater insight for the partnership.

See page 2: 'How our partnership will help support improvements in SEND in County Durham – ACTION 4.'

4.2 Review and strengthen governance structures with clear terms of reference to ensure robust accountability, drive the implementation / delivery of the LAP action plan forward and ensure wider improvement work (including quality assurance) is impactful.

	Tasks	Task Lead	Start	Finish	Additional Resource Names	Evidence of Outcomes
4.2.1	Develop underpinning value principles across the layers of Governance i.e. transparent, open, peer challenge.	Strategic Manager Strategy and Assurance SEND and Inclusion Strategic Manager	November 2024	January 2025	Wider AFI group	Robust accountability, drive the implementation / delivery of the LAP action plan forward and ensure wider improvement work (including quality assurance) is impactful.
4.2.2	Review existing Governance structures and interfaces to consider a future structure that focuses on robust accountability, will drive forward the implementation and delivery of the LAP action plan, ensure wider improvement work (including quality assurance) is impactful and ensure focus on targeting resource to those who need it the most.	As above	November 2024	February 2025	Wider AFI group	As above.
4.2.3	Develop terms of reference for each governance layer / workstreams	As above	Autumn 2024	February 2025	As above	As above.

	incorporating agreed terms and processes for accountability.					
4.2.4	Implement new governance structure and test how this is working with regular reviews.	As above	Spring 2025	First review autumn 2025	As above	As above.

Impact Overview: We will build on how we monitor our partnership progress and ensure that we target support to those who need it most. The partnership's reviewed and revised governance arrangements will help us to do this.

See page 2: 'How our partnership will help support improvements in SEND in County Durham – ACTION 4.'

4.3 Build a continuous improvement feedback cycle where regular communication informs an ongoing practice of course correction to help foster and sustain a high-performance culture.

	Tasks	Task Lead	Start	Finish	Additional Resource Names	Evidence of Outcomes
4.3.1	Strengthen and formalise key feedback processes (including wider communication strategy) that would best inform wider partnership, governance layers ensuring child and family voice at the heart.	Strategic Manager Strategy and Assurance, SEND and Inclusion Strategic Manager.	Spring 2025	Summer 2025	Wider AFI group	Regular communication informs ongoing practice of course correction as art of high-performance culture and this, in turn informs improved practice.

4.3.2	Test feedback loop processes to ensure they inform ongoing consideration of good practice / support course correction practice.	As above	Spring 2025	Autumn 2025	As above	As above.
4.2.2	Roll out feedback loop processes	A above	Spring / Summer 2025	Ongoing	As above	As above.
4.3.4	Review feedback loop processes to ensure continuous improvement. Refine as appropriate.	As above	Autumn 2025	Ongoing	As above	As above.
4.3.4	Use learning and feedback to develop revised SEND and AP strategy as part of wider local inclusion strategy.	Manager Strategy and Assurance, SEND and Inclusion Manager, Practice lead CYPS.	Spring / summer 2025	January 2026	Wider AFI group	Revised strategy reflects how support / resources are consistently targeted to the children and young people and families that need it most. Plans and strategies are joined up across the partnership.

Impact Overview: We will build on how we monitor our partnership progress and ensure that we target support to those who need it most. Ensuring the voice of children, young people and families is at the heart of feedback processes and the continuous improvement cycle.

See page 2: 'How our partnership will help support improvements in SEND in County Durham – ACTION 4.'