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Research and analysis

Strengthening the area SEND framework: what we heard and how we are improving

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Applies to England

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Introduction

In January 2023, Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) introduced a new framework for inspecting special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) activities in local areas.

While our previous framework was limited to a one-off full inspection of each local area (with a revisit if required), the new framework involves a continuous cycle of inspection activity. Local areas now receive full inspections, monitoring inspections when areas for priority action are identified, and engagement meetings to support improvements to the experiences and outcomes of children and young people with SEND.

The new framework has also shifted the focus of inspections, from assessing whether local areas are meeting their statutory responsibilities to evaluating how well members of the local area partnership work together to improve the experiences and outcomes of children and young people with SEND. Local area partnerships bring together education, health and social care organisations that are responsible for the strategic planning, commissioning, management, delivery and evaluation of arrangements for children and young people with SEND who live in a particular local area. Each local area partnership is responsible for the area covered by a single local authority. When evaluating the local area partnership,

inspectors focus mainly on how effectively the local authority and integrated care board jointly plan, evaluate and develop services for children and young people with SEND.

Since we implemented our new framework in January 2023, we have inspected over a third of the 153 local area partnerships in England. In our response to the [Big Listen consultation](#) in 2024, we committed to reviewing area SEND inspections and publishing our findings.

To carry out this review, we worked closely with colleagues at CQC, the Department for Education (DfE) and the regional teams at NHS England (NHSE). We are aware that the DfE is considering reforms to the SEND system, so we focused our review on enhancements we could make to the current framework. Our goal was to support quick but sustained improvements, without reducing accountability for providing services to children and young people with SEND and their families.

We have learned a lot through our inspections about what works well and where improvements have been made that benefit children and young people with SEND. We published what we have learned through our inspections in '[Area SEND framework: findings from the first 2 years of inspections](#)'.

We also held a consultation in which [we spoke to a variety of people internally and across the sector](#), to review the framework and make sure it remains effective and in line with current needs and best practice.

We will continue to work with relevant government bodies, including the DfE and NHSE regional teams, to understand and influence their upcoming plans for SEND reforms, and we will update our framework in response to any changes.

Our objectives for the review were to explore how we could:

- enhance the experience of inspections for children and young people, families and local area partnerships
- improve the clarity and impact of our reporting
- continuously develop the knowledge and skills of our Ofsted and CQC area SEND workforce

Summary of what we heard and the actions we will take

How we can enhance the experience of inspections for children and young people, families and local area partnerships



What we heard

Children, young people and families want more opportunities to share experiences with inspectors

What we will do:

- Increase the amount of time inspectors have for monitoring inspections.
- Provide more opportunities to engage with inspectors during full inspections.
- Make our surveys more accessible and effective.
- Better communicate how children, young people and families can share their views and recent experiences with inspectors.

What we heard

Inspections are resource-intensive for local area partnerships and could be more supportive

What we will do:

- Simplify the data we ask for, and use existing reporting mechanisms, data collection and reports where available.
- Make engagement meetings more reflective and supportive.
- Better target our engagement meetings to support local areas; improve coordination with the DfE and NHSE regional teams to ensure we account for where areas already have significant intervention and oversight.

How we can improve the clarity and impact of our reporting

What we heard

Our reporting should provide more detail about outcomes and clearly assign responsibility to the partner who will address any areas for improvement or areas for priority action

What we will do:

- Where appropriate, specify which member of the partnership should take forward areas for improvement or areas for priority action.
- Explore how we can make our reports more accessible for children, young people and families.

- Share a summary of our survey findings with local area partnerships and family representative groups to support strategic planning.
- In the longer term, and following our wider improvements to education inspections, explore the introduction of a report card for area SEND inspections.

How we can continuously develop the knowledge and skills of our area SEND workforce

What we heard

Area SEND inspections are complex and inspectors would benefit from enhanced training

What we will do:

- Increase the frequency of training for new and existing inspectors throughout the year to enhance their knowledge and skills.
- Update and enhance training for Ofsted and CQC inspectors.
- Explore forming a national pool of Ofsted education inspectors to increase the consistency and expertise of our inspection teams.
- Work with the new Ofsted Academy to continue recruiting Ofsted Inspectors (OIs) and His Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) with relevant experience in SEND and alternative provision.

Who we spoke to during the review

We held 26 external events where we engaged with:

- children and young people
- parents and carers
- family representative groups, including parent and carer forums and charities that represent children, young people and their families
- professionals working in education, health and social care services
- representative groups from different sectors

We also surveyed our inspectors and held 5 round table events with colleagues from Ofsted and CQC, including inspectors, operational and policy colleagues.

Enhancing the experience of inspections for children and young people, families and local area partnerships

What we heard

An improvement on our previous framework

We received positive feedback about our focus on the experiences and views of children, young people and their families, and the inclusion of a social care inspector in the inspection team. We also received feedback from across the sector that the continuous cycle of inspections is an improvement, and many reported a more supportive inspection framework.

Some local area leaders and family representative groups told us that the introduction of area SEND engagement meetings provided a valuable opportunity to bring the partnership together to reflect on and discuss the impact of their arrangements on children and young people with SEND. Some family representative groups told us that the engagement meetings meant they felt more involved in conversations with local area partnerships, and had improved co-production (where children, families and service providers collaborate to make decisions that benefit everyone).

However, we heard from local area leaders, family representative groups and our inspectors that the purpose of engagement meetings could be clearer.

Providing more information about our inspection activity

Many people that we spoke to told us that they would like more information and guidance about our inspection activities. Some children and young people said they could better prepare if they knew what inspectors will ask during meetings. Many family representative groups said it would be helpful to know how they can contribute to inspections to give the views of parents and carers.

Most local area leaders asked for more clarity about the data requested during the inspection, as this would help them to upload the most accurate information quickly. Many of our inspectors told us that the volume of data uploaded can be time-consuming to review and they would also welcome a more succinct data request for local areas.

More opportunities to share recent experiences

We regularly heard that children, young people, families and representative groups would like more opportunities to share their experiences with inspectors, and that methods for sharing feedback should be more accessible. Many local

area leaders said that inspectors should focus on feedback they receive from families about recent experiences of children and young people with SEND. These leaders expressed concerns about being evaluated negatively based on feedback about past experiences that has since been addressed.

One way that we gather the views and experiences of children, young people and families is through our inspection surveys. Many told us that our surveys have the potential to reach a wider range of respondents, and we should consider how they can be made more accessible and circulated more widely.

Volume of inspection activity

During our review, we heard from some local area leaders that inspections can take up a lot of their time, which has an impact on their ability to carry out their day-to-day work. Many family representative groups were concerned that local area efforts are focused on being ready for an inspection, which could be taking their resources away from working directly on the area's challenges.

Some local area leaders told us that greater alignment between inspection frameworks and government departments could facilitate a more collaborative approach and reduce the overall burden of inspection. They said that pressure on them from area SEND inspections could be eased by reducing the amount of duplication in discussion meetings. And sector representatives told us that more clarity on the purpose of our engagement meetings would help them understand what will be discussed and how they can best prepare.

We also heard that it would be helpful for the sector to understand how Ofsted and CQC's engagement meetings differ from the intervention and support that local areas receive from the DfE and NHSE regional teams.

What we will do

Provide more information

We recognise that our inspectors and the sector want clearer guidance about our inspections. In response, we have updated our area SEND handbook to provide additional detail about our inspection activity and how the framework ensures that inspectors gather views from a range of children and young people with SEND and their families. We have also added more information about the purpose of our engagement meetings and the methodology of our monitoring inspections.

We will continue to work with national networks such as the National Network of Parent Carer Forums and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Information, Advice and Support Services to provide updates about area SEND inspections. This will strengthen how representative groups and services can support inspections and share the views of children, young people and families effectively.

We will work with the sector and our communications teams to better publicise our inspections and let children, young people and families know how they can share

their views.

Simplify the data we request

We have condensed and clarified our data request in Annex A of the handbook. Alongside this, we have provided more information in our person-level data template to address frequently asked questions and clarify how data should be presented. We have also published 2 example documents to make it easier for local areas to provide the required information. These changes are intended to reduce pressure on local areas and help them upload the most relevant information for our inspectors to evaluate. This will also help inspectors to review documents more efficiently and focus on the most important information based on each area's context.

Provide more opportunities for children, young people and families to share their experiences

We temporarily paused monitoring inspections while we completed this review. During this pause we reassessed and enhanced our planned monitoring inspection activities to increase the time inspectors have before starting on-site activities. This additional time is for inspectors to hold remote meetings and gather evidence about children and young people's experiences and outcomes in relation to the areas for priority action identified at the previous inspection. This will help inspectors to plan lines of enquiry and give their attention to the areas that need the greatest focus. It will also allow them to better tailor their on-site activities to evaluate the impact of actions that leaders have taken on the areas for priority action. We will start monitoring inspections this term.

In full inspections, inspectors currently meet with representatives from the parent carer forum and/or other representative groups of parents and carers in week 2. Inspectors will now also meet with these representative groups during the on-site week to allow them to compare feedback from these groups with the evidence that they have gathered and further test it in subsequent inspection activities.

We will also adjust the evidence-collection activities that inspectors carry out during full inspections so that they can gather more first-hand evidence from children, young people and families. We will implement any amendments to the timetable from the autumn term onwards.

Strengthen engagement meetings and better coordinate intervention

We have updated our inspection handbook to provide more clarity about the purpose of engagement meetings. These will not form part of our evaluation, but are designed to support collaboration by bringing partners together and keeping the focus on SEND. They will also help Ofsted and CQC to understand the local area context and prepare for the next inspection event. We recognise that local areas need time between inspections to make improvements, and are often having similar discussions with the DfE and NHSE regional teams. To address this, the frequency and timing of engagement meetings will depend on the outcome that the local area receives at their full inspection and any regional intelligence received by Ofsted and CQC.

- Local area partnerships whose arrangements typically lead to positive experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND will be invited to up to 2 engagement meetings before their next full inspection.
- Local area partnerships whose arrangements lead to inconsistent experiences and outcomes for children and young people will be invited to 1 engagement meeting before their next full inspection.
- Local area partnerships whose arrangements are found to have widespread and/or systemic failings will receive a monitoring inspection, usually within 18 months of the date of receiving their final report. They may also be invited to an engagement meeting before their next full inspection. This will usually take place after their monitoring inspection.

Ofsted and CQC will aim to better coordinate engagement meetings with any ongoing contact the local area has with the DfE and Regional NHSE to minimise duplication of meetings.

Improve access to inspection surveys

As part of the new inspection framework, we introduced bespoke surveys for children, young people and practitioners, alongside a new survey specifically designed for parents and carers. We heard that these surveys could be better circulated. We currently ask local area partnerships to share the survey links with children, young people, parents, carers and practitioners in their local area. We will continue to ask local areas to do this, but we will also provide survey links directly to family and children's representative groups to share with their members.

We will continue to work with the sector to improve our surveys, with a focus on how we can enhance their accessibility, increase responses and gather views that reflect recent experiences.

Improving the clarity and impact of our reporting

What we heard

Information in reports

We heard from across the sector that the examples of good practice we include in our reports help them to identify strategies to improve support for children and young people with SEND. Many stakeholders told us that we should provide more such examples, along with information about how local areas can address their areas for improvement and priority actions.

Some local area leaders told us that Ofsted and CQC should do more to acknowledge that partnerships are working in a challenging national context. We

also heard from a few local authority leaders who recommended that we adopt a strengths-based approach to our reporting and avoid emotive language to help our reports remain factual.

We heard varied feedback on the level of detail in reports. While some found reports had too much detail and were difficult to understand, others wanted more detail, including more transparency about findings and the basis for outcomes. Family representatives raised concerns that their views were underrepresented, particularly when the outcome of an inspection was positive in a way that they felt did not reflect their experiences.

Many sector representative groups told us that we should include more information about our inspection survey results, and some local area leaders told us that more information about the themes identified in the inspection surveys would help support their strategic planning.

A few local authority stakeholders felt that area SEND inspections should consider the inspection outcomes of local schools to create a more holistic picture of what it is like to be a child with SEND in that area.

Accountability in our reporting

During the review, many people across the sector said that our reports should clearly assign responsibility for areas for improvement. Several individuals highlighted the importance of ensuring that both areas for improvement and priority actions are properly addressed by local area partnerships following the inspection.

We also heard strong feedback from local authority leaders and sector representatives about the need for shared accountability across education, health and local authority partners. Local authority leaders often express concerns about being held responsible for issues beyond their control.

What we will do

Enhance our reporting

While most areas for improvement can be addressed by the organisations in the local area partnership working together, Ofsted and CQC will improve our reporting by specifying, where appropriate, the bodies responsible for each area for improvement

We recognise that there are national issues in the SEND system which may impact on partnerships' ability to provide positive experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND. We will report on the negative impact of these issues and how well the local area has mitigated their impact on children and young people with SEND and their families.

We will also work with Ofsted regional directors and CQC to assess whether a

local area needs to have more inspectors on site during full inspections and/or monitoring inspections.

We want our reports to have as much impact as possible. Therefore, we will include more detail (where applicable) on how the local area partnership has achieved positive experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND.

We will review our report-writing guidance, training and quality assurance processes to ensure that all inspectors are consistent in their reporting and incorporate the updates outlined in this document.

We recognise that some people would like to see more information about our survey results in our reports, and that local area partnerships in particular would appreciate more transparency about survey results to support their strategic planning. The information we gather from our surveys is part of the evidence base and helps inspectors to identify key lines of enquiry. Inspectors then compare this with information we have gathered in other inspection activities. We treat the information we receive from surveys in confidence, so we will not publish detailed survey results in our report. We will, however, share a summary of survey findings with local area leaders and parent representative groups to support their work.

Explore the introduction of a report card

Ofsted is currently consulting on the introduction of a report card for our education inspection framework. Ofsted and CQC will consider options for further developing the area SEND framework, including introducing a report card after the first cycle of inspection ends in December 2027. We will also work with the sector and our communication and publication colleagues to identify ways to improve the accessibility of our current reports.

Ofsted is currently consulting on introducing an inclusion grade across our renewed education inspection framework. This would provide a greater focus on how well education providers remove barriers to education for children or young people with SEND, including how well they work with the local authority and external agencies.

While we do not inspect schools as part of the area SEND framework, we do recognise that school performance is an important part of the experiences of children and young people with SEND. Where required, area SEND inspections will highlight where services and providers in the local area partnership, including schools, need to work with each other to address areas of priority action or areas for improvement.

Developing the knowledge and skills of our area SEND workforce

What we heard

Inspector experience

Feedback highlighted the positive ways in which inspectors engaged during inspections, including speaking directly to children, young people and their families. Children and young people told us that they felt comfortable talking with our inspectors, which enabled them to openly share their thoughts on what was working well for them and how their support could be improved.

Many people told us that area SEND inspection teams should have a comprehensive understanding of SEND across the education, health and social care sectors. Sector and family representative groups emphasised the importance of inspectors having direct experience of SEND, while local area leaders said inspectors should have experience of whole-system working and leadership.

Inspector training

We received feedback both internally and externally about how we could continue to support and develop our area SEND workforce. Many of our inspectors told us that their training opportunities, including shadowing an experienced colleague, prepared them well for their first inspection. Most inspectors told us that they would value more frequent opportunities to refresh their knowledge and more comprehensive shadowing opportunities, especially before they lead an inspection. Inspectors also told us that they would value more joint training with education, social care and health inspectors to understand the roles of the other remits on the team.

Many local area leaders said it was important that inspectors receive training on the functions and fundamentals of the SEND and partnership systems as a whole. We also heard that our inspectors should have a robust knowledge of the legislative foundations of the framework, as well as the national issues and context within which local area partnerships operate. Some family representative groups told us inspector training should provide a firm understanding of how family representative groups function and how they can support inspections, but also how this can vary across areas.

What we will do

Provide training for Ofsted and CQC inspectors

Across the summer, we will update our training for newly recruited area SEND Ofsted and CQC inspectors and the annual refresher training that we provide for existing Ofsted and CQC inspectors who carry out area SEND inspections. Updated training will capture what we have learned from the first 2 years of inspection under the current framework, learning from our 3 thematic reports and the feedback we have received from this review.

Starting in the autumn term, we will provide additional refresher training for our inspectors ahead of area SEND inspections to enhance their inspection planning so that it accounts for the latest guidance and changes in the sector.

We are committed to strengthening the expertise of our workforce by continuing to recruit OIs and HMI with SEND experience from the sector. We will also explore having a team of education HMI operate on a national basis for area SEND inspections, rather than only inspecting local areas within a specific region. This approach aligns with the national deployment model already used by our OIs, social care inspectors and CQC inspectors, which enhances the flexibility, consistency and expertise of our inspection teams.

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