

Children and young people with SEND disproportionately affected by pandemic

The report reveals the findings of joint visits to local areas by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC), carried out during the autumn term of 2020 and spring term of 2021. It highlights the cumulative effects of disruption caused by the pandemic on the health, learning and development of children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). And it describes the negative experiences of children and families, including missed and narrowed education, the absence of essential services such as physiotherapy or speech and language support, and long waiting times for assessment and treatment.

By the time of Ofsted's final visits in the spring, inspectors found that families were exhausted, even despairing, particularly when they were still unable to access essential services for their children.

The report finds that existing weaknesses in the SEND system have been exacerbated by the pandemic, as children are more likely to have been 'out of sight' of services. These include:

- weaknesses in universal education, health and care services, resulting in children and young people not learning essential skills and knowledge, and mistakenly being identified as having SEND
- significant inconsistencies in how SEND is identified
- a lack of joined-up commissioning and joint working across education, health and care
- a lack of clarity between organisations about who is responsible and accountable within local area SEND systems

The report recognises that children and families' experiences are in part determined by the quality of their relationships with practitioners and the strength of partnership working in a local area, as well as the extent to which a local area has implemented the government's 2014 SEND reforms. It notes the importance of all education settings being ambitious for every child and young person with SEND, ensuring that they receive a good quality curriculum and teaching. This is particularly important in relation to the teaching of language and early reading.

The report makes several recommendations for improvement in the SEND system, including:

- more accessible universal services for children and their families, delivered by practitioners with a strong understanding of how to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND
- more accurate identification when children need targeted or specialist support and higher aspirations for children and young people with SEND

- a greater sense of joint responsibility between partners in a local area, clearer accountability for different organisations within local systems, and greater coordination of universal, target and specialist local services so children get the right support at the right time

Ofsted has been developing a new inspection framework with the CQC aimed at driving further improvement in the SEND system and supporting children and young people at this critical moment.

In a [commentary accompanying the report](#), HM Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman, discusses the most significant proposals for the framework ahead of a formal consultation. [CQC has also published a blog](#) about the report's findings and their future work for children and young people with SEND.

Commenting on the findings, Amanda Spielman said:

Many local area leaders and practitioners have gone above and beyond to support children and young people with SEND and their families during this challenging time. However, our report shows that children and young people were not always getting the education and care they needed, even before the pandemic.

As the damaging effects of the pandemic on children and young people with SEND become clear, so too does the need to ensure that we are all playing our role in supporting them. We will work closely with CQC to develop a new framework to support improvement in the way education, health and care services work together to get the best possible outcomes for children.