

Improvement Notice

To: St Helens Metropolitan Borough Council ('the council')
Town Hall
Victoria Square
St Helens
WA10 9TH

This Improvement Notice is issued to St Helens Metropolitan Borough Council on 30 October 2026 by the Department for Education following the Ofsted and Care Quality Commission (CQC) Area SEND Inspection, published on 19 June 2026 and in response to the areas for priority action and improvement highlighted in the report.

1. This notice is given to address the 2 areas for priority action and 5 areas for improvement identified in the report of the inspection published on 19 June 2026.
2. To comply with this notice, the following actions are required of the Council, working with Cheshire and Merseyside Integrated Care Board (ICB) and its other local partners ("partners"), as set out in section 28 (2) of the Children and Families Act 2014.

Improvement steps to be taken

3. The Department requires the Council to prepare and submit a Priority Action Plan and an updated Strategic Plan, which will set out how the Council will address the areas of concern identified.
4. These improvement plans must cover the areas for priority action and areas for improvement as specified in the Ofsted and CQC inspection report published on 19 June 2026.
 - a. Leaders must urgently improve how the partnership collects, checks and uses SEND data across education, health and social care so that leaders can plan services effectively, identify inequities and understand the impact of their work.
 - b. Leaders must urgently review the referral criteria, and pathways, for children and young people with SEND accessing mental health services and neurodevelopmental assessment and support. The partnership must ensure that children and young people with SEND access the right support for their needs at the earliest opportunity, on the most appropriate assessment and treatment pathway.
 - c. The local area partnership should strengthen the effectiveness and consistency of the graduated approach across education, health and care so that children's and young people's needs are identified and met earlier and escalation to crisis, exclusion or AP is reduced.

- d. The local area partnership should improve the timeliness, quality and oversight of EHC plans which are updated as part of the annual review process. This should ensure that plans are up to date, reflect children's and young people's current needs and aspirations, include clear and measurable outcomes, and are shared with all relevant practitioners.
 - e. The local area partnership should improve the availability, clarity and consistency of targeted and specialist short breaks so that families understand thresholds and routes of access, and children and young people receive the right support at the right time.
 - f. The local area partnership should address the inequity of access to some health services in St Helens, including:
 - enhancing the outreach of special school nurses and paediatric services in the community; and
 - improving access to neurodevelopmental assessment and treatment pathways, including for ADHD.
 - g. The local area partnership should accelerate at pace the recovery plans to reduce children's and young people's lengthy waits for neurodevelopmental assessment pathways across all ages. They should enhance the support given to children and young people and their families across education, health and care while they wait.
- 5. The Council have recently worked with partners to produce a Local SEND Reform Plan, and if the Reform Plan is treated as the "Strategic Plan" then it is this document that will need to be updated to address the areas of concern above. Whether the Council and its partners update the Reform Plan, and/or a separate strategic planning document, we require that plans for improvement align with plans for reform.
- 6. During the period in which they are delivering necessary improvements against the specific areas set out in this Improvement Notice, the Council and its partners must demonstrate the ability to also show progress against these reform requirements.
- 7. The Council's plans, developed with the ICB, should deliver appropriate and sustainable improvement, take account of the views of parents, children and young people, school and education leaders and put co-production at the centre of improvement activity.
- 8. The Department is also providing a SEND adviser and a finance adviser to offer support and challenge to the Council on identifying and delivering the necessary improvements. The Council should work with these advisers, and any other support and challenge programmes put in place, until such time that the Department is satisfied this is no longer required.
- 9. To ensure there is clear evidence of robust oversight:
 - a. the Council must ensure there is an Improvement Board, with an Independent Chair, which is attended by key leaders across education, health and care services, Parent/Carer Forum and appropriate Elected Members of the Council, to a timetable agreed with the Department. It is

- expected that the Chief Executives of the Council and the ICB, and the Children's Services and ICB Accountable Officers are held to account for the improvements required to be made through effective engagement with the Board and escalation/resolution of matters arising as the Board identifies;
- b. the Improvement Board must have clearly assigned accountabilities for all actions agreed, along with clear and measurable targets covering the areas of priority action and areas for improvement identified in the Ofsted and CQC report and any actions recommended by DfE;
 - c. the Improvement Board must take equal responsibility to ensure that it also deliver against the core minimum requirements of the Local SEND Reform Plan, and that improvement actions are progressed in alignment with the Local SEND Reform Plan;
 - d. those accountable for the actions in the plans must keep the content up to date, with a risk register and mitigation plan updated in line with the meeting cycle and provided to the Improvement Board in advance;
 - e. reports to the Improvement Board should include data, analysis and evidence of the impact of improvements on the lived experience of children and families;
 - f. the Improvement Board should maintain an action and impact log which is updated at each meeting, highlighting objectives which are slow to progress and where contributions need to be strengthened.
10. Invitations to Improvement Board meetings must be sent on each occasion to the DfE-appointed SEND adviser, NHS England adviser and to the Department's case lead as external attendees, rather than members of the board.

Improvement against the above measures will be assessed as follows:

11. The DfE appointed SEND adviser and NHS advisers, working alongside regional representatives from the respective departments, will provide regular updates to Ministers and the Department more generally of progress or concern against the areas set out in this notice; improvement against the Ofsted and CQC requirements; and any other such information relevant to the improvement journey.

Department for Education Stocktake Reviews

12. Officials from the Department will undertake reviews of progress against the Priority Action Plan and the Strategic Plan at least every six months and more regularly where appropriate. We will also discuss delivery of your local SEND Reform Plan at least every three months, as part of the ongoing monitoring of these reforms – and where possible, we will seek to align timings so that the stocktake review meetings can also cover that quarter's monitoring of your Reform Plan.

13. Reviews, including deep dives into the areas for priority action, areas for improvement, and implementation of SEND reform, may cover but are not limited to leadership; governance; co-production; quality of workforce training and support; multi-agency arrangements including joint commissioning, education, health, and social care provision; the timeliness and quality of Education, Health and Care plans; and engagement with children, young people, families and carers.
14. Prior to any reviews, the Council should provide to the Department its own assessment of improvement. This may include, but is not limited to:
- a. progress against Priority Action Plan and Local SEND Reform Plan objectives;
 - b. feedback from parents, carers, children and young people;
 - c. clear information about local accountability and governance structures;
 - d. the documentary evidence used to plan, track and evaluate the impact of actions. This may include:
 - i. A progress update against each area of priority action, each area for improvement and DfE recommendations;
 - ii. A dashboard of performance measures showing whether targets and milestones are being met in a timely manner; any slippage; evidence of impact and whether the local area is on track to meet the next set of milestones.
 - iii. Evidence that key partners, including children and young people, families and schools are playing an active role in improving services.
15. From time to time, the Department may require that a diagnostic review or assessment is undertaken by a party agreed with the Department.
16. For any review or assessment, the Council must provide the person(s) conducting it with:
- a. access to, and time with, staff and leadership;
 - b. accurate and up to date data on performance and quality;
 - c. facilities to carry out the reviews; and
 - d. access to minutes of meetings or any other relevant information.

Timescales:

17. The Council should aim for actions included in the Priority Action Plan and updated Strategic Plan to be delivered by the end of December 2027 or sooner, and for the impact measures set out in those plans to be evidenced by the agreed target dates. The Council should also ensure that delivery of the Local SEND Reform Plan is evidenced.
18. This Improvement Notice will not be stepped down until the Minister agrees that there is sufficient evidence of improvement against all of the areas for improvement. The Council should continue to deliver its local SEND Reform Plan alongside this improvement activity – if implementation of the Reform

Plan is not line with expectations, the Department may consider a revised or new Improvement Notice to address this.

Failure to comply with this Improvement Notice by the assessment dates or poor progress:

19. Should the Council be unwilling or unable to comply with this Improvement Notice or should the Secretary of State not be satisfied with the Council's progress at any stage, she may choose to invoke her statutory powers of intervention (s497A Education Act 1996) to direct the Council to take any further actions deemed necessary to secure the improvements required in SEND services.

Signed:

Date: 30 October 2026

Helen Pledger

Senior Civil Servant in Department for Education