

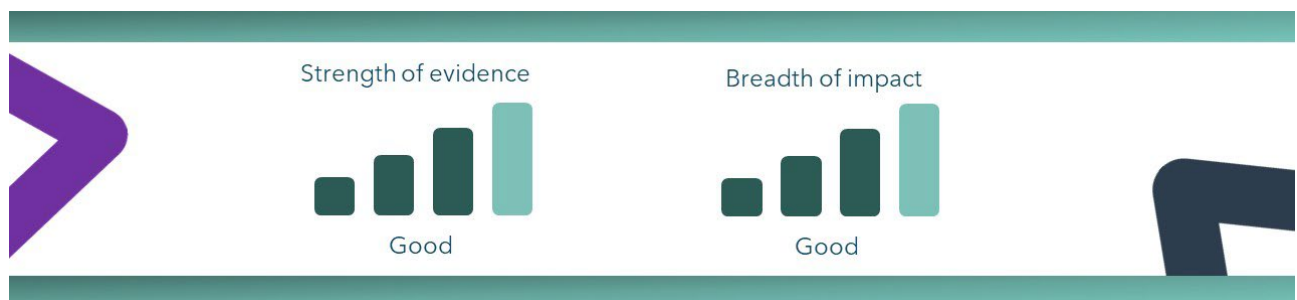
Effective Practice case study: co-operation and assistance – sustaining strong strategic partnership working in Islington

Summary

Leaders in Islington recognise that sustaining effective partnership working requires not only cultivating positive relationships but also creating structures and embedding a culture that can sustain partnership working so that the partnership is resilient and enduring.

As one senior Council leader summed it up, *“As a local area, Islington has been recognised through external inspection and peer support as providing a strong, mature, and effective children’s partnership. This is down to many factors, but most importantly we believe, are the positive relationships between those partners that underpin it. The following case study therefore sets out how as a partnership, we have gone about developing those positive relationships and ensuring their sustainability, as well as the impact of this on outcomes, in the hope that this will support other local areas with their SEND quest for excellence.”*

The SEND Effective Practice Evidence Framework considers that the “strength of evidence” of this case study is **good** – partnership working arrangements have been sustained for over five years and evaluated through a mixture of internal self-evaluation and external review and inspection. The “breadth of impact” of this case study is **good** – there is evidence of impact on outcomes for young people, lived experiences of families and positive feedback from partners.¹



¹ The SEND Effective Practice Evidence Framework uses two “signal strength” indicators to present the strength of evidence and the breadth of impact of a case study. Each indicator has four bars – emerging, promising, good and robust. The “strength of evidence” indicator is based on how the project has been evaluated and the length of time it has been sustained. The “breadth of impact” indicator is based on whether the case study can demonstrate impact in four broad areas – the more areas of impact, the higher the signal strength indicator.

Why was this work undertaken? What did the work aim to do?

In 2018, leaders of Islington's SEND system embarked on a new iteration of their partnership working arrangements. They recognised that effective partnership working relies on strong relationships between partners, and set out to foster strong, positive relationships between the local authority, health services, education settings, parents /carers, young people, and the wider voluntary sector in the borough. At the same time, they also recognised the inherent fragility of a system based solely on good relationships and sought to formalise their approach to partnership working so that it was sustainable and sufficiently resilient to cope with changes in personnel and new challenges.

"The Children and Families Act 2014 sets specific duties of cooperation and assistance between local authorities and partners to meet SEND needs. ... As a partnership further developing our response to the SEND Reforms, we identified 'cooperation and assistance' as the core focus of our planning and implementation, seeing this as the foundation on which the delivery all other systems, processes and arrangements would stand or fall." – Senior leader, Islington Council

Put simply, there were two main aims of this work:

1. To foster relationships and build a partnership that is sustainable and resilient: to develop a shared approach to partnership working in Islington that relied not only on a few key individuals, but provided a common ethos, shared understanding, and agreed ways of working that would become part of the culture of the Borough. In other words, to establish a sense of "this is how we do things in Islington" that all partners could buy into, and anybody new to the borough would be inducted into.

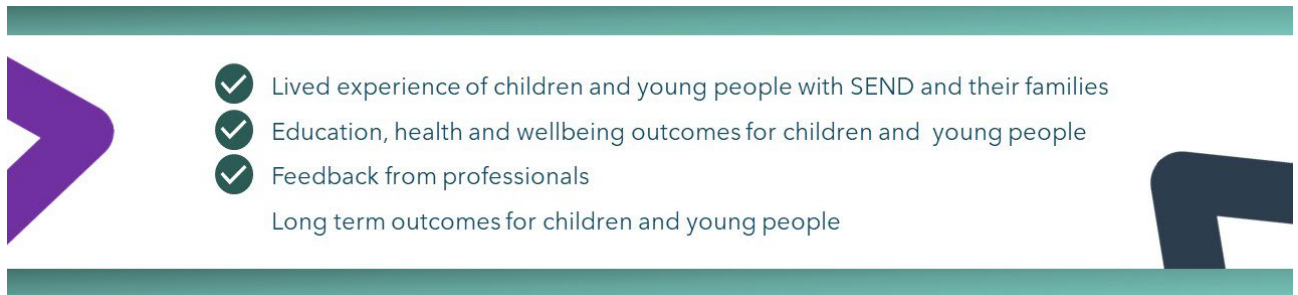
"Although the SEND partnership was well established locally, it was recognised that cooperation was largely reliant on individuals and relationships formed largely through strength of personality and good will. We saw the need to consolidate the cooperation and assistance duty in a more sustainable, definable way, therefore." - Senior leader, Islington Council

2. For the Islington partnership to focus on specific system-wide challenges and deliver impact and better outcomes. Below are some of the priority projects that the Islington SEND partnership has focused on over the last five years.
 - A. Strengthening inclusion and SEN support: due to evidence of inconsistent approaches to inclusion in mainstream schools, and higher rates of EHCPs than comparator local areas.
 - B. Developing a new SEMH support offer: due to growing need and the lack of a join-up offer.

- C. Strengthening the preparation for adulthood support offer and improving long-term outcomes for young people with SEND: due to a lack of understanding and breadth of pathways.
- D. Developing a broader approach to parent / carer participation and co-production: recognising that many parents / carers may want some level of involvement with and communication about the local SEND system, but not all want the same level of involvement.
- E. Developing more provision within the borough and developing a strategic plan for managing the high needs block within budget: reducing the need for out-of-borough placements and avoiding the risk of overspend.

Many of these projects, and the reasons that prompted them, will be familiar to other local SEND systems. What is particularly interesting about Islington's approach is the focus on developing a set of "ways of working" to achieve these goals, built on a foundation of strong relationships within a sustainable and resilient partnership framework.

What was the impact?



- ✓ Lived experience of children and young people with SEND and their families
- ✓ Education, health and wellbeing outcomes for children and young people
- ✓ Feedback from professionals

Long term outcomes for children and young people

The project has been able to demonstrate impact in three of the four areas captured by the SEND Effective Practice Evidence Framework. Islington leaders recognise that it is difficult to quantify and measure the effectiveness of co-operation, the strength of relationships, and the resilience of partnership working. As such, the evidence for the effectiveness of Islington's approach is drawn from two sources – internal partner feedback and external validation of the strength of partnership working, and evidence of impact on the specific projects on which the partnership has focused.

1. Fostering relationships and building a sustainable, resilient partnership

The Islington SEND Board undertake an annual self-evaluation. Since 2018, partners have consistently ranked partnership working in the top two strengths of the local SEND system. In the local area's 2021 SEND inspection, inspectors commented on the commitment of leaders to providing the best for children and young people with SEND, and their sustained commitment to the SEND agenda, including during the pandemic period.

Islington's approach to building and sustaining partnership working has also led to recognition from national government, with Islington becoming a "sector-led improvement partner" (SLIP). In the 12 months to the end of 2023, Islington had supported six local areas on their SEND improvement journeys following their SEND inspections and the requirement to produce a written statement of action to address areas for development. Five of those local areas were subsequently judged to have made progress in addressing areas for development when re-inspected.

"The greatest test of the cooperation and assistance duty may yet be to come therefore, but we remain confident that relationships will withstand the challenges." **Senior leader, Islington Council**

"Area leaders, including council members, are fully committed to providing the very best for children and young people with SEND. Leaders are dedicated and ambitious. Leaders are focused on continually improving services in Islington. The area's joint commissioning arrangements put children and young people's needs first. Strong, strategic leadership brings together well-established teams across education, health and social care. ... Despite the challenges that the area has faced through the pandemic, leaders have sustained their commitment. Leaders have remained true to their values and maintained the momentum of continuous improvement. Throughout this time, they ensured that the area's most vulnerable children, young people and families were continuously in sight."

Local Area SEND Inspection [Report](#), November 2021

"We just want to share with you the good news that we have had our SEND Improvement Notice lifted. It's a great way to end the education year and I do want to thank all of you in Islington for your generous support and genuine efforts to understand us."

Senior leader from a local area to which Islington provided sector-led improvement partner support

"The feedback I have got is colleagues have found it invaluable to meet up with a peer in an authority very different to [our local area]. You're not a LA that borders [our local area], but having space away from the LA is invaluable to talk through and share what we are doing in a reciprocal way. This is an opportunity for shared and joint learning and that's the space we need to be in. No LA has it all nailed. That has been the most invaluable thing."

Senior leader from a local area to which Islington provided sector-led improvement partner support

2. Deliver outcomes and impact on specific projects

Leaders of the SEND system in Islington consider the impact of their collaborative partnership working is seen in the specific projects that they have focused on as a partnership.

- A. Strengthening inclusion and SEN support: while seeing an increase in EHCPs, the rate of increase in Islington has been slower than that in inner London, similar local areas and England.

Key Stage 2

Phonics			
% pupils meeting Expected Standard of Phonics (screening check Year 1)			
SEND Status	Islington	Inner London	National
EHCP	27%	26%	19%
SEND Support	56%	53%	45%
No SEND	84%	86%	83%

Children with SEND, both EHCP and SEND support, outperformed their peers nationally in meeting the expected standard of Phonics at Yr 1 in 2022-23.

Reading, Writing and Maths			
% achieving at least Expected Standard for Reading, Writing and Maths at KS2			
SEND Status	Islington	Inner London	National
EHCP	5.2%	11.0%	7.0%
SEND Support	38.4%	34.1%	22.0%
No SEND	75.2%	86.3%	76.1%

A higher proportion of pupils with SEND Support achieved the expected standard in Reading, Writing and Maths compared to similar pupils nationally.

- B. Developing a new SEMH support offer: Islington co-produced with young people a new role of "Emotional Wellbeing Workers", who provide emotional wellbeing and mental health support and are based in youth centres. Support from the Emotional Wellbeing Workers, CAMHS and voluntary sector counselling and therapeutic services have been integrated, with a single point-of-access within the children's services "front door". This approach has helped to reduce CAMHS referrals, reduce instances of young people not attending first appointments, and reduced the rate of exclusions before the pandemic from above the national average in 2015-18 (0.11-0.14 in Islington compared to 0.8-0.1 nationally, to below the national average in 2019/20 (0.05 in Islington to 0.06 nationally). This approach received special commendation in the Health Service Journey partnership awards in 2020, and recognised in Islington's local area SEND inspection.

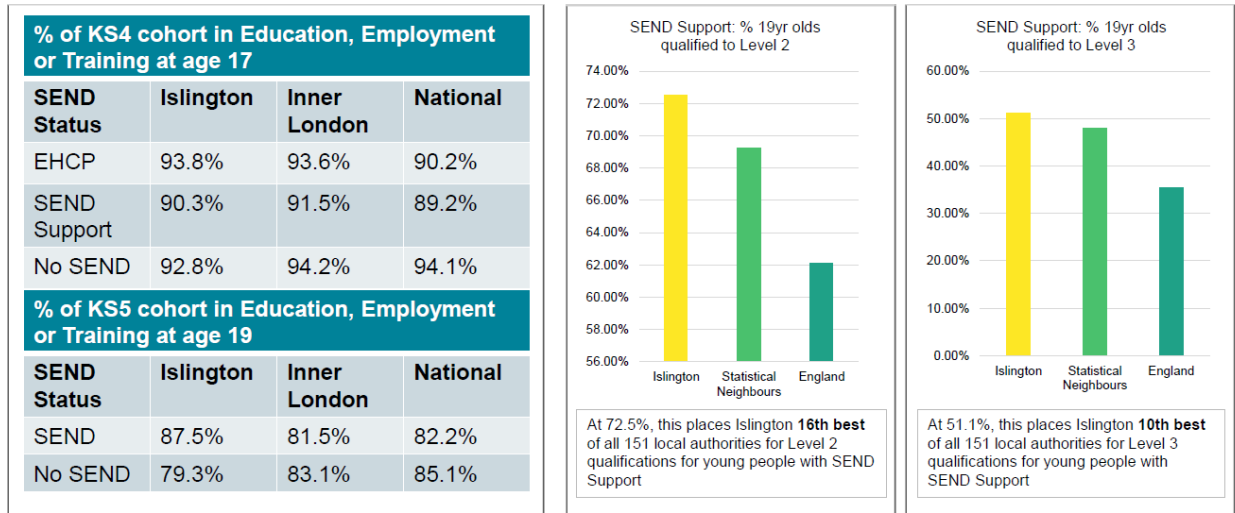
"The service was simple, accessible and reacted quickly to complex patient's needs. The impact this has on the individual service user and the clinical professional, in service terms (providing clinical input when needed) can't be underestimated. It is an excellent integration of all sectors including health, social care and housing, which has a lifelong impact on individuals." **HSJ judges' comments**

"Working together, their focus is on ensuring children and young people quickly receive the services they need. One successful example of this is the area's work to redesign services to support children and young people's social, emotional and mental health."

Local Area SEND Inspection Report, November 2021

- C. Strengthening the preparation for adulthood support offer and improving long-term outcomes for young people with SEND: Islington have successfully expanded their offer for young people with SEN, including increase and range and take-up of supported internships.

Progression to Adulthood



27 young people have benefitted from Supported Internships over the last 12 months. Since the Supported Internship programmes began in 2018, 79 young people have been placed. In September 2023, 35 interns who had completed their programme were interviewed. The interviews found that 60% of the interns had remained in sustained employment.

- D. Developing a broader approach to parent / carer participation and co-production: Islington have successfully developed a parent charter and a 'pyramid of participation', with different levels of engagement for parents / carers of children with SEN – this includes a SEND Co-production Group, with eight elected parent representatives, a consultative group, and a new 'Parent Parliament', launched in 2023, to gather views on specific issues from a wider group of parents / carers of children with SEND. Islington's approach to parent participation and co-production has been commended by parents and in the local area SEND inspection.

"The Parent Parliament is great." **Parent / carer**

"Leaders take seriously the views of parents and young people. Partnerships with parents and young people are meaningful and effective. Leaders actively involve parents and young people in shaping the area's policies as well as practices. The 'Parent Charter' is an example of parents working together with area leaders to agree a set of expectations and principles that all can follow." **Local Area SEND Inspection Report, November 2021**

- E. Developing more provision within the borough and developing a strategic plan for managing the high needs block within budget: Islington have created new specialist provision within the borough, including units located in mainstream schools, and reduced reliance on out-of-borough placements in the independent sector. In 2015, 7.6% of Islington young people with EHCPs were placed in independent or non-maintained settings, compared to 6.6% nationally. In 2023, that figure had dropped to 3% in Islington, compared to 6.2% nationally. At the end of 2023, Islington's high needs block remained in balance.

What were the key actions and practices involved?

There are three key practical elements that have contributed to the effectiveness of Islington's approach to partnership working around SEND.

1. Formalising a shared commitment, roles, responsibilities, and ways of working

Islington developed a joint agreement between partners that set out roles, responsibilities, and ways of working, that has helped to establish ground rules and serves as a reference point that partners can return to. Leaders argue this joint agreement is crucial to building trust and relationships and sustaining that approach to partnership working so that it is not dependent on individual relationships. This approach to formalising roles, responsibilities and expectations between partners has extended to the development of the parent charter, for example, and is reflected in day-to-day things like individuals' job descriptions.

*"Trust plays an important part in relationships between organisations. But even where there is trust, as a partnership we agreed that a written agreement could help avoid misunderstandings, provide a common reference point, provide a useful guide to collaboration daily as well as when confusion." **Senior leader, Islington Council***

*"Development of the joint agreement took place over a series of meetings and events, with all relevant partners, including schools, parent and carers forum and coproduction group, colleagues within the CCG (ISB), and the voluntary and community sector. The process of development was as important as the final product in ensuring engagement and raising awareness of collective responsibility as a principle. Although the ways of working set out in the document are now well-embedded across services, the agreement continues to sit as a point of reference and as an important part of the language used to induct new staff." **Senior leader, Islington Council***

*"Events took the form of workshops. We had a clear vision and knew the outcome we wanted. The focus was always on the experience of the end user – our children and young people and their families. We were therefore able to establish a repeatable format of ideation, prototyping and interaction." **Senior leader, Islington Council***

2. Cross-agency processes

Islington have developed a range of cross-agency practices and processes, meaning that leaders and staff across the borough have opportunities to scrutinise data and intelligence, debate and reach strategic decisions, and monitor and quality-assure partnership activity as a partnership. For example, Islington have developed a joint EHC Management Board, which considers requests for EHCNAs, section 17 assessments from the Disabled Children's Team, and Continuing Care assessments in an integrated manner.

3. Demonstrating impact on specific priority projects

Lastly, Islington leaders consider that key to making partnership working successful and securing ongoing buy-in of partners is to make the work of the partnership concrete by focusing on specific projects, delivering them successfully and demonstrating evidence of impact. This links the role of the partnership with making a positive difference on the ground to families and professionals.

Has the work been sustained?

This work has been sustained - while much of Islington's work draws on long-term influences (e.g., a focus on the experiences of citizens through the Citizen Charter), the specific "co-operation and assistance" iteration of partnership working was started over five years ago. Islington's work as a sector-led improvement partner, supporting 12 local areas (at the end of 2023) is testament to the relevance of their work to others. They contend, however, that the idea of building relationships through co-operation and assistance is relevant not only to other local SEND systems, but also to smaller-scale or single organisation partnerships.

As one Islington leader put it, *"We describe a system-wide approach but believe the core elements of relationship building based on cooperation and assistance could equally apply to locality based, smaller scale projects and within-organisation development, as well as to other local areas. The process is as, if not more important than the product (i.e., a document). Sustainability is all, however."*

While the individual projects and initiatives overseen by the Islington SEND partnership have required investment, developing and sustaining the collective leadership and partnership working arrangements across the Borough have not required any additional financial investment. The main resource required has been the ongoing commitment of partners to working together as a partnership.

	Resources required	Value for money
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Financial investment	<input type="checkbox"/> Sustained £ needed
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Human resources	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Cost neutral
	<input type="checkbox"/> Physical space	<input type="checkbox"/> Savings (+outcomes)



Finding out more

Contact to find out more	Candy Holder, Assistant Director for Inclusion, Islington Borough Council Candy.Holder@islington.gov.uk
Useful resources and links	Partnership "joint agreement" Parent Charter Pyramid of participation Available here .