

# Effective Practice case study: creating the role of a “SEND Strategic Lead” in a healthcare provider in Northumbria

## Summary

In 2019, Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust (NHCT) created the role of “SEND Strategic Lead”. The role was designed to improve governance of SEND within the Trust, to ensure that there was a strong health provider (as well as a health commissioner) voice in SEND partnership discussions, to strengthen quality assurance of Trust contributions to the SEND agenda, build workforce understanding of SEND, and drive improvement in SEND services. After 12 months, the role was evaluated and the decision was taken that the Trust should continue to have a designated SEND Strategic Lead. The concept of having a SEND Strategic Lead has since been replicated in a neighbouring Trust. Since its creation, working alongside DCOs (Designated Clinical Officers), having the role of a SEND Strategic Lead has ensured that there is a strong provider voice within the SEND partnerships of which the Trust is part, built understanding of SEND within the Trust's workforce, and helped to drive improvements in the quality and timeliness of health service contributions to EHC needs assessments and plans.

The SEND Effective Practice Evidence Framework considers that the “strength of evidence” of this case study is **good** – the role has been evaluated and findings shared internally, and has been sustained for four years. The “breadth of impact” of this case study is **promising** – there is evidence of impact in terms of feedback from professionals and outcomes for young people.<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> 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?

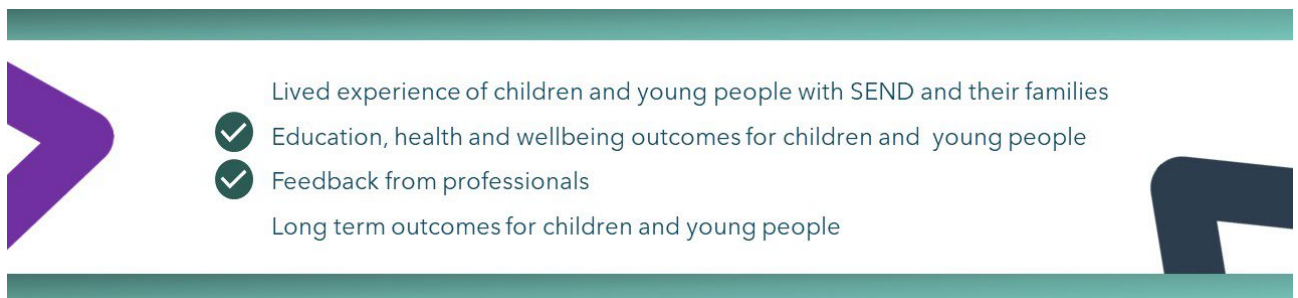
Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust (NHCT) covers a wide geographical area and is responsible for providing services to the populations of North Tyneside and Northumberland. This involves working two local authorities and two Integrated Care Boards (previously Clinical Commissioning Groups). Within the Trust, services for children and young people are spread across three different business units. Taken together, these arrangements made creating a coherent Trust-wide approach to SEND challenging, both for partners in the local SEND systems (who had to liaise with multiple service leads) and within the Trust (pulling services together to fulfil their SEND responsibilities and drive improvement work coherently).

For this reason, in 2019, leaders agreed to create the role of a "SEND Strategic Lead" within the Trust.

The role had two core aims:

1. **To establish the SEND Strategic Lead role to ensure coherence in the Trust's work on the local SEND agenda** - having a single, named lead who could be the focal point of SEND within the Trust, and having a strong health provider (distinct from, but complementary to, the health commissioner) voice in SEND partnership discussions; and
2. **To drive improvement in the Trust's contributions to the SEND agenda** – including, for example, working with the Designated Clinical Officers (DCOs) to ensure the quality and timeliness of EHCNA advice, but also to contribute to specific projects to improve healthcare provision and outcomes for young people.

## 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 two of the four areas captured by the SEND Effective Practice Evidence Framework. Since 2019, the role of the SEND Strategic Lead has helped to achieve impact against both of the two principal aims that were behind its creation.

## 1. Ensuring coherence in the Trust's work on the local SEND agenda

Within the Trust, SEND is now explicitly referenced within the Trust's 5-year planning cycle, while the Trust now has a SEND development plan, a network of SEND Champions covering all key service areas, and regular networking, information and training to boost understanding of SEND across the workforce.

The SEND Strategic Lead is a member of all key local SEND partnership boards. There has been consistent positive feedback on the role from SEND partners. The Parent Carer Fora (PCF) for the two local areas have commented on the value of having a single, named point-of-contact within the Trust, fostering two-way communication of health information through PCF networks and PCF information in health settings. The SEND Strategic Lead has also worked with the PCF in Northumberland to co-produce a sensory processing website, as part of the development and launch of a new sensory processing service in November 2023. Partners have also commented positively on the value of the SEND Strategic Lead role in relation to inspection preparation, SEND partnership self-evaluation, provision and scrutiny of health data as part of a core SEND dataset. Equally, there has been positive feedback from within the Trust, specifically on how the role has enabled the Trust to achieve objectives in the Trust's SEND development plan and fulfilled its statutory responsibilities.

*'The SEND Strategic partnership within North Tyneside has worked, and continues to work, very effectively. We come together from different services and work collaboratively, which enhances efficiency, streamlines communication, and ultimately improves the outcomes and experiences of children/young people with SEND and their families. ... [The] SEND Strategic Lead for the Trust is a vital part of this partnership. The partnership would not work if one of the key stakeholders were not a party. [The SEND Strategic Lead] being part of the partnership has also allowed for professional relationships to be built which we can use in our everyday work.'*

**Director and Vice-Chair of North Tyneside PCF**

*'The NHS Trust SEND Strategic Lead role has been central to both operational and strategic improvement work within health. Operationally, the role has ensured SEND workforce development, quality assurance and improvement work is embedded in day to day processes within the Trust and strategically to work alongside commissioners in planning and meeting need as part of the Local Area SEND Partnership. The role is invaluable in supporting the DCO, coordinating inspection responses and in proactively finding positive solutions to challenges.'*

**Strategic Lead for SEND, Northumberland County Council, and DCO, North East and North Cumbria ICB**

## 2. Driving improvement in the Trust's contributions to the SEND agenda

Working with DCOs, the SEND Strategic Lead has overseen an improvement in the timeliness and quality of Trust advice for EHC needs assessments, following the creation of a standard EHCNA advice pro forma, a quality-assurance framework and a cycle of audits in 2020. This is vital in maintaining consistency, given staff turnover within the Trust. Completion of EHCNA advice within timescales has improved from 64% in 2021, to 85% in 2022 and 89% in 2023. In terms of quality, advice is consistently free from jargon (100% in audits in 2022 and 2023), explains clearly the implications of health needs for daily life (100% in 2022 and 2023), contained the source and date of observations (80% in 2022, 64% in 2023), and makes recommendations within professional boundaries (90% in 2022, 100% in 2023), with all sections of the ECHNA pro forma complete (66% in 2022, 86% in 2023).

In 2021, the local area SEND inspection reports for both North Tyneside and Northumberland commented positively on the improvement in the quality of health service contributions to EHC needs assessments and plans. The North Tyneside report stated, *"The designated clinical officer (DCO) worked with partners from education, health and care to co-produce a multi-agency SEND e-learning package. This training, coupled with stricter quality control measures, has led to improved contributions from health practitioners to EHC plans."* The Northumberland report stated, *"EHC assessment and planning have improved since October 2018. ... Information from health practitioners is included and integrated well."* In addition, the SEND Strategic Lead has contributed to specific improvement projects, for example a project to strengthen access to therapy services and improve outcomes for children attending special schools in North Tyneside.

School staff taking part in the project were asked to rate changes to their knowledge, skills and confidence in delivering health recommendations, and changes in activity and participation of their pupils, using a standardised assessment tool. In evaluations in both the winter term 2021 and spring term 2022, close to 100% of school staff agreed that they had seen improvement in their confidence and skills in the participation of pupils in relation to recommendations from occupational therapy, physiotherapy, and speech and language therapy.

## What were the key actions and practices involved?

There have been three key elements that have been crucial to ensuring that the role of the SEND Strategic Lead is effective.

### 1. Create clear parameters of the role

This requires:

- ✦ Creating clear job descriptors and ring-fenced time for the role. The role requires someone with experience of leadership, management and partnership-working across services and organisations, but also has to have dedicated time for the role so that it can be balanced with other responsibilities.
- ✦ This requires that the establishment of the role is understood by all partners, and is included in the membership of boards (e.g., local SEND partnership boards), partnership meetings (e.g., with PCFs), and key strategic documents (e.g., Trust service and development plans). This requires getting buy-in to the role at an operational (service leads) and executive leadership level within the Trust, so that there is agreement about who will be responsible for fulfilling SEND responsibilities within the organisation. It also requires making clear to wider partners (DCOs, leaders of LA SEND services, Parent Carer Fora) that there are important benefits of the SEND Strategic Lead role, not least having a named point-of-contact responsible for SEND within the health provider trust who will attend SEND partnership meetings.
- ✦ It is necessary to define how the SEND Strategic Lead role complements, but is distinct from, the role of the DCO. There are significant benefits of the two roles working together – on quality-assuring EHCNA advice – but the value of the SEND Strategic Lead is in co-ordinating health provider contributions to strategic improvement work *from within the provider organisation*. For example, one of the DCOs with whom the Trust works, stated: *"... the SEND Strategic Lead for the provider trust ... plays a critical role in the SEND partnership. Prior to her taking on the role it was a challenge for me, as DCO, to obtain qualitative and quantitative data around statutory compliance, communicate key messages across the various business units that contribute to the SEND statutory process, and influence changes in practice. Having [the SEND Strategic Lead] in post ensures that the provider trust is working effectively across the SEND Strategic Partnership, and quality improvement work has been ongoing at a strategic and operational level."*

## 2. Workforce engagement

A vital aspect of the SEND Strategic Lead's work has been increasing workforce understanding of and engagement with the SEND agenda. In NHCT, the SEND Strategic Lead has created a network of SEND champions (a named SEND lead within each service), a Trust-wide SEND forum (bi-monthly meetings to enable the flow of information and two-way communication), and, working with DCO colleagues, a SEND basic awareness eLearning training programme. The SEND Strategic Lead and DCO have a rolling programme of attending service staff meetings across the Trust. Crucial to the success of establishing the role of the SEND Strategic Lead within the Trust, and driving improvement work, has been the combination of having a named "go-to" person responsible for SEND within the Trust, having a range of ways of communicating regularly with staff (e.g., the SEND forum), CPD that connects with and is valuable in staff's day-to-day, and data to show where, within the Trust, training is and is not being accessed and practice is or needs improving.

## 3. Quality-assurance

In 2020, the SEND Strategic Lead and DCO co-developed a trust-wide quality assurance framework and 6-monthly audit cycle. These are aligned with individual service quality assurance processes, multi-agency audits, and reports on quality and compliance to Trust and SEND partnership boards. The SEND Strategic Lead has also introduced central oversight and co-ordination of requests for EHC needs assessment advice, and standard operating procedures, to ensure consistency, timeliness and monitoring of progress. The Trust have also introduced an EHCP flag in their data systems, to improve join-up of health and local authority information about children and young people with SEND. The role has not required any additional resources, as the role of the SEND Strategic Lead is included as part of additional senior manager role. If the role was created as a standalone role, then the resources required would include the postholder's salary and oncosts.

## Has the work been sustained?

The role of the SEND Strategic Lead was first introduced in 2019, and was evaluated after 12 months. The decision was taken then, in 2020, that the Trust should continue to have a designated SEND Strategic Lead. It is now very much part of business-as-usual within the Trust and local SEND partnership arrangements. The Trust have had the role in place ever since. Another Trust in a neighbouring area has since adopted the role, which has had the added benefit of enabling peer-to-peer support between the two SEND Strategic Leads. This would be relevant to a Trust or SEND system leaders in another local area seeking to strengthen partnership working between local authority, health commissioners and health providers around SEND.

	<h3>Resources required</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Financial investment</li> <li>✓ Human resources</li> <li>Physical space</li> </ul>	<h3>Value for money</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Sustained £ needed</li> <li>✓ Cost neutral</li> <li>Savings (+outcomes)</li> </ul>
--	---	--

## Finding out more

<b>Contact to find out more</b>	Gillian Vince, Senior Manager (Speech & Language Therapy, Paediatric Occupational Therapy, Podiatry) and SEND Strategic Lead, Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust <a href="mailto:gillian.vince@nhct.nhs.uk">gillian.vince@nhct.nhs.uk</a>
<b>Useful resources and links</b>	SEND Strategic Lead role descriptors – see <a href="#">here</a> .