Executive Summary - Cheshire East SEND and Alternative Provision Theory of Change

Supporting evidence base for Cheshire East SEND Reforms

Cheshire East's Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) system has undergone significant improvement in the last year through strengthened partnership working, greater system stability, and clearer governance arrangements across the local area. A year ago, many elements of the system would have been characterised as underdeveloped with limited collaboration and insufficient structure to drive improvement. Today the Cheshire East SEND and Alternative Provision (AP) Partnership is demonstrating stronger collective leadership, improved co-production and a shared commitment to long-term system reform.

The partnership vision is: ***'Together we will make Cheshire East a great place to be young.'*** Central to this vision is the ambition for all children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities to be **HAPI**: **H**appy and healthy, **A**chieving their potential, **P**art of their communities and as **I**ndependent as possible whilst making choices about their future. The partnership is committed to ensuring children and young people receive the **right support in the right place at the right time**.

A key driver for improvement has been the strengthening of co-production across the local area. Cheshire East has adopted the **TOGETHER** in Cheshire East model, to establish a shared and inclusive understanding of co-production across the partnership. Parents / carers and young people now play a much stronger and more influential role in shaping services and strategic priorities. The Parent Carer Forum (PCF) and Jigsaw SEND Youth Forum are active contributors to strategic planning, engagement activity, the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA), the Cheshire East Local Offer for SEND and wider system development.

Despite this progress, Cheshire East recognises that significant pressures remain across the SEND system. Rising levels of need and complexity, increased demand for Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), long waiting times across neurodiversity pathways, and historic insufficiency in specialist provision continue to impact children, families and services. Demand for specialist placements has increased, alongside reliance on independent and non-maintained provision. The local area also recognises the need to improve the timeliness of EHC needs assessments and strengthen early intervention and SEN Support arrangements.

In response, Cheshire East is developing more inclusive mainstream education through a new Inclusion Framework and proposed Inclusive Mainstream Practice model. This approach aims to strengthen schools' ability to meet needs earlier and more effectively through targeted support, workforce development and inclusive practice. The intended outcomes include reductions in suspensions, part time timetables, requests for statutory assessment and elective home education linked to unmet need, alongside increased confidence and capacity within mainstream settings.

Alongside inclusion reform, the partnership is refreshing its SEND Sufficiency Strategy to ensure future investment supports sustainable local provision. This includes expanding Resource Provisions, SEND Units and Special School capacity while also supporting inclusive practice in mainstream environments. The long-term ambition is to reduce dependence on costly independent placements and ensure more children and young people can access high-quality support within their local communities.

Cheshire East acknowledges that system and cultural change take time. However, there is now a clear understanding of both strengths and areas for development, stronger partnership maturity, improved governance, and a shared commitment to sustained improvement. Change is happening at pace, and the foundations are now in place to deliver a more inclusive, responsive and sustainable SEND system for children, young people and families across Cheshire East.

Change is happening at pace. We know ourselves. We know where strengths lay and where gaps exist. Partnership is strengthening. Systems, strategies and arrangements are emerging. System and cultural change happen incrementally, and our plans are at an early stage. Our social care and early help services are undergoing substantial transformation through the introduction of the Families First model. The recent Ofsted ILACS monitoring visits show that improvement is taking place in social care.

Cheshire East has a strong contribution from the Parent Carer Forum (PCF) and they are an active participant in planning for the reforms. The PCF meets regularly with leaders and plays an active role across the partnership. The Jigsaw SEND Youth Forum is an influential voice, contributing to the JSNA, the Inclusion Strategy, the Local Offer for SEND and the annual SEND conference.

Governance arrangements have also recently improved. A new SEND Improvement and Assurance Board which is independently chaired reports to the most senior political and organisational leaders.

Cheshire East SEND reform Theory of change – v4

Situation	Cheshire East's 0 - 25 SEND system faces increasing demand for EHCPs, a need for a workforce development strategy and inconsistent early identification. The system is fragmented, processes vary between agencies, and the graduated approach is not yet consistently embedded across all schools. Families experience variability in communication, uneven co-production, and waits are too long for specialist pathways. Governance has historically been reactive, driven by financial crisis management, with a lack of strategic alignment across the Local Authority, Integrated Care Board (ICB) and education partners. These issues create an unsustainable Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) pressure and reliance on independent placements. **Key Challenges:** • Rapid growth in referrals for EHCPs with EHCP numbers growing 70% over the last four years. • Improving our quality and timeliness of EHCPs and EHCP Annual Reviews • Changing complexity of need with increased numbers of children and young people with SEMH (28%) and SEMH being the largest primary need in EHCPs, along with Speech, Language and Communication Needs (28%). • Due to a fragmented data landscape across education, health and social care, it is difficult to ensure that we have a reliable and a robust SEND Needs analysis to help us plan effectively. We also need to better utilise data from our SEND Joint Strategic Needs Assessment. • Workforce pressures and demands with the recruitment and retention of Educational Psychologists (EP), Speech and Language Therapists (SALT) and Occupational Therapists (OT). This is impacting on assessment and waiting times. • Inconsistencies in early and appropriate identification of need. • There is variable inclusion practice across the partnership. Quality first teaching and the graduated approach is not yet consistently applied. • Alternative Provision (AP) commissioning frameworks need to be strengthened to include quality assurance, monitoring and review. • Managing the High Needs Block deficit through a remodelled Designated Schools Grant Management Plan. • Lack of confidence by parents/carers in the SEND Service largely due to poor communication and feedback loops. The local area needs to gain the trust of parents, carers, families and young people. • Work is needed to continue to strengthen the local area SEND Improvement and Assurance Board, ensuring that the board is operating in a proactive rather than a reactive way. • Commissioning of pathways is not consistently joined up across systems and partners, and there is an incomplete shared understanding / transparency around what is available / commissioned (including thresholds); commissioning is often reactive and not always directly linked to or responsive to needs. • Historic health commissioning arrangements means there is a lack of parity in health services. • Pathways for support are not always clear for educational settings and parents / carers.	**Aims**	Cheshire East aims to create an inclusive, sustainable 0–25 SEND system where all children and young people live, thrive and belong with the *Right Support, in the Right Place, at the Right Time*. Our Shared Journeys vision links and aligns with the Schools White Paper, with mainstream inclusion, early intervention, and partnership at its core. **What success looks like:** • Robust consistent inclusive practice in all settings, supported by a clearly understood universal and targeted support offer. • Further strengthened SEND Partnership oversight and monitoring in which support and challenge is provided ensuring that the priorities in the SEND Reforms are moving at pace. • Children and young people's needs are identified early and that support is put in place quickly. • A strengthened format for regularly collating and sharing SEND performance information will be in place. • There will be improved support, pathways and processes across education, health and care where best practice is routinely sought, shared and further implemented. • An Experts at Hand (EAH) multi-disciplinary offer is embedded across early years, schools, colleges and out of area Further Education (FE) settings. • There will be guidance documents and resources for schools to complete effective SEN Support Plans, and templates to undertake quality assurance audits in order to improve the quality of SEN Support Plans. • Through engagement with the Inclusion Framework, barriers to learning will be removed, leading to greater independence and participation of children and young people with SEND. • A co-produced, multi-agency Inclusion Strategy, embeds the culture of inclusion. • Improved working relationships and agreements between education providers, Cheshire East Council, health providers, and Integrated Care Board will help to secure better outcomes for young people in Cheshire East. • Reduced escalation for referrals for EHCPs through earlier intervention and better support. • Wherever possible and supported by strong confidence in the system, children's needs are met within their local communities, alongside their peers, in the most appropriate setting in line with their individual needs. • Families experience trust, co-production, transparent decision making, and timely communication. • Shared accountability across the local authority, ICB, multi-academy trusts (MATs) and educational settings supported by clear governance. Our robust, well-understood and mature governance structure ensures there is accountability and evidence-based, streamlined and timely decision-making across the system. • A Workforce Development Plan will outline recruitment and retention actions to support a highly skilled workforce across education, health, and social care. • A fully co-produced SEND Sufficiency Strategy, with clear priorities, outcomes and delivery plans will be in place. A detailed sufficiency assessment linked to need, including mapping, forecasting and financial modelling will be in place. • Mainstream education providers will have an option to submit a 'Provision Proposal' to receive a SEND capital allocation to develop inclusive practice to meet needs locally. • A DSG Management Plan will support a more financially sustainable system including a resource allocation document on how we use specialist education. • A Local Authority led SEND decision making processes document outlining specific guidance on how to make decision making more robust regarding high cost placements will be in place. There will be responsive and outcome-focused integrated commissioning with robust monitoring and quality assurance framework processes across the system at both a local and regional level.

Inputs and activities	Outputs	Change mechanism	Outcomes	Impacts
Resources: Financial • Additional funding has been made available to fund Experts at Hand in order to build multi-disciplinary outreach capacity. • High Needs capital to expand innovative inclusive provision (including inclusion bases) and adapt mainstream settings. • Transformation funding to strengthen project management, data analytics, and workforce development. • Inclusive mainstream funding to support education providers. **Workforce Capacity Building** • Funding for building workforce capacity including additional Educational Psychology capacity. SALT, OT, sensory support, Neurodevelopmental specialists, youth workers, portage workers. • Strengthen School SENCO networks. • Develop Continuing Professional Development (CPD). • Develop Family Hub Practitioners role. • Training for Social Care Teams including Designated Social Care Officer and Preparing for Adulthood Teams. **Improving Data** • Development of single integrated dataset, i.e. a single version of the truth. • Shared dashboards for schools, LA and ICB Standardised SEND registers across schools. **Partnership Working** • Strengthened relationship with the Parent Carer Forum and Youth Forums (Jigsaw) in which the	**Strengthening Inclusive Practice** • A refreshed, co-produced Graduated Approach and Inclusion Toolkit, consistently adopted by all education providers resulting in a refreshed and standardised inclusion framework and graduated approach. • Standardised mainstream inclusion expectations agreed by Multi-Academy Trusts, schools, Local Authority, Integrated Care Board and Parent Care Forum (PCF) and in line with the national inclusion standards. • National inclusion standards consistently applied, and inclusion practice standards integrated into Quality Assurance and school improvement conversations. • Strengthened SENCO networks. • Development and publication of co-designed guidance on Alternative Provision. • Increased multi-agency workforce (Educational Psychologists, Speech and Language Therapists, Occupational Therapists, Cheshire East Autism Team (CEAT) and Social Care) • Development of CPD framework. • Universal offer across early years, schools and FE. **Increasing Local Inclusive Capacity** • Develop a Cheshire East SEND Sufficiency Strategy with clear priorities, outcomes and delivery plans through the SEND Reform process. • The SEND Sufficiency Plan will identify the scope for expanded mainstream education settings and development of inclusion bases across the localities. • Develop Implementation and Delivery Plans. • Outline plan for further expansion of specialist school places.	**Earlier identification of need resulting in reduced escalation** • Strengthened offer and inclusive mainstream practice, supported by an Experts at Hand outreach model which builds education provider capability and capacity. • Increased teacher confidence means that teachers feel more equipped to work with children and young people with SEND - leading to being able to offer support at SEN Support level rather than the need for an EHCP / and leading to better outcomes for children and young people with SEND. **Consistent Inclusive Practice** • Innovative inclusive provision (including inclusion bases) leading to expansion of local capacity. • Improved confidence in mainstream education settings support to children and young people with SEND builds trust which may lead to less need for specialist provision such as independent placements. **Building Trust and Parental Confidence** • Continued development of co-production with Parent Carer Forum and young people. • Clearer communication about the Cheshire East Local Offer for SEND and available support. • Increased confidence in mainstream schools being able to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND. **Confidence and data led decision making** • Shared dashboards leading to improved commissioning, workforce	**Short term – Year 1 and 2** • Improved timeliness of EHCP advice and SEN Team communication. • Earlier identification of need via Family Hubs and 0–19/Neurodivergent triage. • Increased school confidence in application of the graduated approach. • Clearer referral and assessment pathways and reduced waiting for universal/targeted support. • Improved communication with parent carers and young people and better use of Local Offer for SEND. **Medium term – Year 2 and 3** • Reduction in EHC needs assessment requests because of improved SEN support and application of the graduated approach. • Earlier identification of need via Individual Support Plans, Family Hubs and Knowing Me Tool. • Rising proportion of children and young people with SEND met locally. • More consistent Alternative Provision use with clear access routes. • Reduced parental complaints, mediations, and tribunals. • Improved timeliness and quality of EHC processes and plans due to implementation of Experts at Hand (EAH) model • Waiting time for specialist services is reduced because of the new way of working (EAH). • Improved parental trust and confidence in service delivery • Increase in school attendance, engagement and behaviour. • Full inclusion as evidenced by areas such as more positive feedback from children, young people and families around feeling included within settings and as though they belong to an area, and reporting better	**Children, young people and family benefits** • Children and young people achieve success locally, accessing needs-led and timely support. • Children and young people are healthier, happier and better prepared for adulthood because their needs are met early and locally. • Fewer crisis escalation cases because early help and neurodiversity pathway improvement reduces unmet need. • Higher levels of post-16 independence, community participation and employment. • Improved family confidence which is based on trust and improved participation. **System benefits** • Financial sustainability achieved, supporting value for money and long-term planning. • Mainstream inclusion strengthened resulting in reduced exclusions, improved attendance, and fewer placement breakdowns. • Stronger multi-agency system, with shared ownership and strong governance. • Stable and skilled workforce, better able to manage demand. • Multi-agency partnerships, embedding joint ownership of outcomes. • Full alignment with Shared Journeys and Schools White Paper expectations with an inclusive mainstream-first system. • A system capable of adapting to future policy changes due to effective governance, strong data and co-production.

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TOGETHER co-production principles are supported. • Shared Journeys programme with six multi-agency workstreams. • Strengthened SEND Improvement and Assurance Board. • Educational settings having strong communication links with the local authority (including the SEND team), Integrated Care Board and other partners. **Experts at Hand (EAH)** • Implement joint advice models across education and health. • Reduce ND / SALT / OT waits through targeted improvement, triage of cases and workforce development. **Sufficiency and place planning** • Expand innovative inclusive provision (including inclusion bases) for even coverage across the Borough. • Increase local specialist capacity where evidence of need is shown. • Reduce reliance on independent placements through local alternatives such as inclusive mainstream practice and specialist places such as at Westfields. **Governance and leadership** • Independently chaired SEND Improvement and Assurance Board. • Joint commissioning across LA and ICB. **Co-production and communication** • Consistent ‘You said, we did’ loops.	• Undertake a review of resource provision and SEND units and identify opportunities to expand, ensuring the provision fits with pathway planning. • Explore opportunities for mainstream education settings to develop alternative provision to meet the needs of their cohorts. • Development of flexible alternative provision, including short-term, preventative and reintegration focused options. • Strengthened the Alternative Provision commissioning framework ensuring consistent Alternative Provision admission criteria, improved quality assurance, and a robust monitoring and review framework. • Outline a plan of how capital funding will be spent on adaptations and assisted technology to improve accessibility in mainstream education settings for children and young people with SEND (e.g. autism-friendly and sensory-friendly adaptations). • Ensure provision is geographically balanced and pathways aligned between phases of education to reduce the need for extended travel. **Experts at hand (EAH)** • A robust Experts at Hand offer available across all phases covering early years through to post 16. • An agreed triage and access route for Education, Health and Care advice, through either the Neurodivergent Team, Speech and Language Therapy, Occupational Therapy Team, or targeted interventions and outreach. • EAH will provide timely, high-quality multi-agency advice for statutory processes and especially for Individual Support Plans (ISPs).	support sufficiency and forecast planning.	emotional health, plus more young people feeling that they can talk to a trusted adult and making positive transitions through life etc. **Long term Year 3-5** • Inclusive mainstream practice embedded across all settings. • Significant reduction in independent placements. • Improved attendance, engagement, attainment and SEMH outcomes. • Balanced Dedicated Schools Grant and sustainable use of resources. • Established multi-agency services delivering a cycle of continuous improvement.	

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	• Develop a Triage system which will screen referrals and identify those needs that can be met at a universal level. • Service menus will be developed outlining the universal, targeted and specialist support offer. • Shared multi-agency datasets and dashboards will be developed which will be used to track demand, timeliness and outcomes for children and young people with SEND. • Ensure there is a strong link with Family Hubs and neurodivergent Pathways. **Governance** • A robust local area SEND Partnership governance and reporting structure will be in place. • A Joint Commissioning Strategy to be devised. • A completed Local Partnership Maturity Assessment gives a structured overview of how well the partnership is functioning and what it needs to improve. • The ‘Shared Journeys’ project groups with defined scopes and milestones.			