

SCRUTINY REPORT

MEETING: Children's and Young People's Scrutiny Committee

DATE: November 2025

SUBJECT: SEND Annual Engagement Meeting with Ofsted

REPORT FROM: Ben Dunne, Director of Education and Skills

CONTACT OFFICER: Robert Arrowsmith, Head of Strategy, Assurance & Reform, Children's Services

1.0 BACKGROUND

1.1 As part of Ofsted and Care Quality Commission (CQC) Area Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) framework there is an Annual Engagement Meeting with each Local Authority. The purpose of these meetings is for Ofsted, the CQC and the local area partnership to discuss the partnership's self-evaluation, SEND action plan, any challenges, and how leaders are addressing them. These meetings do not result in an evaluative outcome, but shape Ofsted (& CQC's) approach to the local area and can inform the timing of future inspections.

2.0 ISSUES

2.1 Normally for a local area judged in an Area SEND inspection to have widespread and system failings, such as Bury, the Annual Engagement Meeting (AEM) would take place following a monitoring inspection that evaluated the progress being made against the action plan that has to be submitted following the inspection. However, there is a backlog in monitoring inspections nationally and within the region, caused by the number of local areas judged adversely within the framework.

2.2 Monitoring inspections are supposed to take place within 18 months of the full Area SEND inspection, which would be before the end of 2025 in Bury's case (Area inspection February 2024). There are other local areas in the North West and nationally who had seriously adverse judgements in the Area SEND inspections before February 2024 who have yet to receive monitoring inspections.

2.3 In this context, where Ofsted and the CQC are prioritising local areas within the monitoring inspection schedule, the Annual Engagement Meeting has the potential to shape their thinking.

2.4 Formal Annual Engagement Meetings (AEM) also take place for Children's Services overall under the Integrated Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) framework with other aspects of children's services, such as Early Years and Schools and Post-16 education, also having meetings between regional and Ofsted leads during the year. The AEM for SEND differs in two important respects – firstly, the regional SEND lead for Ofsted is joined by his peer from the CQC; and

secondly, Integrated Care Board (ICB) representatives and parent carer forum representatives (in Bury's case Bury2Gether) are also invited and attend the meeting.

2.5 As noted earlier, the local area is expected to share its self-evaluation and action plan as part of the preparation for the meeting. For this meeting, Bury shared an updated version of the recent DfE Stocktake self-evaluation from July 2025 (see listed background paper and attached paper), in addition to the DfE letter assessing the progress made by Bury and the next steps that had recently been published on the DfE website.

2.6 The meeting with Ofsted took place virtually on October 20th, with senior representatives from across the partnership in attendance, including the Executive Director for Children & Young People Services, Executive Director, Health and Adult Care (Bury Council) and Deputy Place Lead (NHS GM (Bury)), the new Director for Early Years, Education and Skills and a representative from the Parent Carer Forum.

Key areas discussed included:

1. **Self-Evaluation and SEND Action Plan** The local area presented its updated SEND self-evaluation and action plan, which reflect current priorities, progress against previous inspection findings, and areas identified through internal review. These documents are being used to drive strategic improvement and align multi-agency efforts.
2. **Addressing Areas for Improvement** Specific actions taken to address previously identified weaknesses were outlined, including improvements in EHCP timeliness, strengthened co-production with families, and enhanced oversight of therapy provision and waiting times.
3. **Maintaining and Improving Good Practice** The meeting highlighted examples of sustained good practice, such as inclusive education initiatives, early years support, and collaborative working between education, health, and social care, including plans in place to further develop these strengths through targeted investment and workforce development.
4. **Monitoring Impact** Local area leaders described the governance mechanisms in place to monitor the impact of improvement activity, including regular performance reporting, feedback loops with families, and quality assurance reviews. These are helping to ensure accountability and responsiveness.
5. **Emerging Issues** The partnership also discussed emerging challenges, including increased demand for specialist provision, national workforce pressures, and the implications of upcoming SEND reforms.

While there is no formal evaluation or published outcome provided by Ofsted and the CQC afterward, it was a positive meeting. The self-evaluation (SEF) was well received described as clear, concise, reflective of a growing understanding of our strengths and challenges as a strengthening partnership and spoken of as “answering many questions” in advance of the meeting. A letter outlining the discussion and any follow-up points is anticipated later this term.

List of Background Papers:- 251002_Bury SEF_AEM Final Version

Contact Details:- Robert Arrowsmith, Head of Strategy, Assurance and Reform