

Ofsted/CQC Inspection Guidance for SENDIAS Services

The following document is designed to support SENDIAS service managers and teams with preparing for and engaging with Ofsted inspectors during the Ofsted/CQC local area SEND inspection process.

The document begins with an outline of the purpose of SENDIAS service involvement in the inspection process before giving an account of the structure and content of this process. It then outlines some key inspection preparation tips before moving into real examples from inspection experiences. Each example highlights what inspectors focused on, what information was shared, and what approaches proved helpful. Services may find it useful to use the tips as a checklist and draw on the examples when preparing their own evidence or meeting notes.

Local area SEND inspections can feel daunting, but they are also an important opportunity to demonstrate the value and impact of SENDIAS services. This guidance has been created to help you approach the process with clarity and confidence.

Purpose of SENDIAS service involvement in the inspection process

During an Area SEND Inspection, Ofsted and CQC value SENDIAS services as an important source of insight into the experiences of children and young people with SEND and their families.

Inspectors are interested in the themes, experiences and perspectives gathered through SENDIAS service's work, as these help build a broader picture of how effectively the local area identifies needs, responds to concerns, delivers support and improves outcomes for children and young people with SEND, while meeting the needs of families. They may also look at how the SENDIAS meets the Minimum Standards, particularly on capacity and joint commissioning.

Inspection process

Before the meeting

Inspectors will:

- Review the SENDIAS service website and publicly available information to understand the service and its role within the local area.
- Gather background information about the local SEND system and key stakeholders.
- Consider the insights and experiences gathered through SENDIAS service casework to build a wider understanding of how the local area is working for children and young people with SEND and their families.

Inspection meeting

- The SENDIAS service will typically meet with the lead inspector(s) via Microsoft Teams during week 2 of the inspection.
- Attendance is expected at the specific time slot allocated by inspectors.

- The meeting usually lasts approximately one hour.

SENDIAS service expectations

What inspectors want to hear

Inspectors are looking for an honest, balanced, and evidence-based perspective on the local SEND system.

Local area context

Be prepared to discuss:

- The overall SEND picture from the SENDIAS service's perspective.
- Key strengths within the local area.
- Areas requiring improvement.
- Recent developments or improvements and any emerging impact.

Experiences of children, young people and families

Share:

- Real-life experiences and themes emerging from casework.
- Success stories where SENDIAS service involvement has led to positive outcomes.
- Examples where systems are not working effectively.
- Evidence of barriers faced by families.
- Themes identified through enquiries, tribunal support, complaints, casework, or advocacy work.

Inspectors are particularly interested in understanding the difference services are making to children and families.

Strategic involvement

Explain:

- The SENDIAS service's role within the local SEND partnership.
- Involvement with local area leaders and strategic groups.
- Contributions to service development and improvement.
- How the SENDIAS service provides challenge and constructive feedback.

Inclusion and voice

Inspectors may ask about:

- How the voices of children and young people are gathered and represented.
- Groups who may be less likely to access information, advice, and support.
- How the SENDIAS service ensures seldom heard or marginalised groups are included.
- How feedback is used to influence services and decision-making.

Key messages for SENDIAS service managers

- Be honest and balanced.
- Use evidence from your day-to-day work.

- Share both successes and concerns.
- Use the Minimum Standards as a framework and identify all the ones you are meeting, those you are not/are working towards and why not/what would help you do so.
- Bring the experiences of children, young people, and families to life through examples.
- Demonstrate how the SENDIAS service contributes to service improvement and strategic discussions.
- Highlight the experiences of groups whose voices may not routinely be heard.
- Remember that inspectors are seeking to understand **the effectiveness of the local area SEND system**

Practical preparation checklist

Before the inspection meeting, ensure you can:

- Review key themes emerging from casework.
- Identify current strengths and areas for improvement across the SEND system.
- Gather examples of positive outcomes and ongoing challenges.
- Consider the experiences of underrepresented or harder-to-reach groups.
- Reflect on the SENDIAS service's involvement in strategic forums and partnerships.
- Be ready to discuss any recent local developments and their impact on families.

Summary

The SENDIAS service meeting should feel like a professional conversation rather than an inspection of the service itself. Inspectors value the impartial perspective SENDIAS services bring and are interested in hearing about the experiences of children, young people, and families. This is an opportunity to share a balanced, evidence-informed view of strengths, recent developments, and any ongoing challenges across the local SEND system.

A SENDIAS service manager's top tips for inspections

- Aim to have two people present to give one another breathing space, thinking time, and breaks.
- Share any reasonable adjustments to meet your own needs ahead of time.
- Use Post-it notes with key statistics and clear heading lists to track what has been covered and check at the end that you have shared the key points you intended to raise.
- Consider how to present and celebrate the day-to-day operational life of the service.
- Identify what could be improved and consider what practical steps could help achieve this.
- Consider your local area context, including how it works and where it may be appropriate to signpost families for further support.

What to expect from your meeting with the inspectors

Example 1

Our meeting was a one-hour virtual session with two inspectors: 1 x Ofsted inspector; 1 x CQC inspector. Our commissioner was also present. The meeting was ahead of them being in the district and with intention of supporting them to identify their "key lines of enquiry".

We tried to share as much as we could rather than awaiting the questions. This gave the sense of more control over the meeting as well as feeling we gave the sense of really knowing our service/local area.

We shared the following with the inspectors:

- An overview of our service, including staff team make-up, how we work as a SENDIAS service, relevant historical context, and changes since moving to a different provider.
- Social media presence and associated statistics.
- Details of our steering group, including members and examples of co-production.
- How we work with other professionals across the district, including discussion of the Parent Carer Forum.
- How we link with the Family Hubs.
- How we promote the local area's advocacy service.
- Our commitment to using "You said, we did" approaches as a service and across the local area.
- Common concerns and worries, including increases in EBSA, breakdowns in communication between settings and families, pressures around specialist places linked to the national picture, and non-attendance at tribunals.
- Links with other SENDIAS services, both within our provider organisation and regionally.
- What service users struggle with most in relation to our service, and how we manage expectations and learn from this. For example, we explained our legal duty to remain impartial and clarified that we do not have the power to tell settings what to do. We also discussed related documents and information on our webpage.
- Future priorities for our service and key projects for the year ahead, including our internal standards document and plans to make our "Working together" document more accessible, for example through voice recordings. We also revisited plans to increase involvement with a newly appointed SEND Hub Coordinator.
- A brief discussion about the SEND Change Programme and how it is working in our area in relation to our service.
- Our key challenges and how we are addressing them, including capacity, managing service user expectations, strengthening co-production with children and young people, and signposting to local support where this falls outside our role.

We also prepared the following which were not asked for by the inspectors:

- Case studies.
- Positive feedback and comments from service users.

- Relevant statistics, although these were still shared during the discussion.
- Additional questions focused on the Local Offer element of our contract, including newsletter reach, website statistics, how children and young people in AP are consulted as part of co-production, and whether parents are raising concerns about support for young people to access apprenticeships or internships.

Example 2

During the meeting with the inspectors, they were looking at how the LA and Health shared information within the local area, including with other organisations, parent carers, children, and young people. They were also keen to hear about the impact of services and changes on service users.

A lot was covered within the meeting, including but not limited to:

- Local area policies, ordinarily available provision, improvements, changes, and co-production between the LA, partners, and service users.
- How we share information with service users and where we signpost them for further information, including the Local Offer, ordinarily available provision document, and local information hubs containing information from the LA and Health.
- We were able to share concerns around short contracts and lack of funding for the SENDIAS service, and how these impact staffing and resources.
- We shared monitoring reports, highlighted key data, and provided service user feedback.
- The area partnership, current challenges, and what was working well. We felt able to provide a balanced and fair overview of how the service users we support currently experience the system.

Example 3

This was a **monitoring inspection**, so the focus was on local area improvement following the previous full inspection, which had identified widespread and/or systemic failings. Unlike a standard inspection, the emphasis was not on the SENDIAS service alone during our meeting.

Inspectors were particularly interested in:

- Feedback from families, including why they were seeking advice and support.
- Themes such as neurodiversity pathways and what support is available while families are waiting.
- Timeliness of new assessments and support plans issued after annual reviews.
- How the local area collaborates as a partnership.
- The SENDIAS service's involvement in the improvement journey and ongoing development work.

I was notified by the local area (the SEND Leader in this instance) and invited to attend a one-hour virtual meeting at the end of week one, ahead of their key lines of inquiry. To prepare, I:

- Created a presentation and separate notes to support the meeting, highlighting service achievements and next steps, data, key themes, case studies, IASSN national involvement, and local improvement work.

- Conducted a helpline and casework survey with the team one month prior to the meeting, then summarised issues raised by 71 contacts/families over a 10-day period to provide anecdotal evidence alongside data.

Although the meeting was informal, the presentation helped me stay focused and ensure I covered everything. Inspectors requested a copy of the presentation afterwards for further review.

Final thoughts

Taken together, these experiences show that inspectors are mainly trying to understand how SENDIAS services fit into the wider local picture — how information is shared, how families experience the system, and how services work together across the area. They pay close attention to what families are telling you, the pressures they are facing, and how openly you talk about challenges as well as what's going well. What comes through strongly is that preparation helps, but so does simply being clear, honest and grounded in real-life experiences. All of these things help inspectors build a fair view of the service, the local area, and the progress being made.

Finally, inspections are an opportunity to highlight the commitment, expertise, and impact of SENDIAS services. By preparing confidently and using the shared experiences included in this document, services can engage constructively with inspectors and contribute to a stronger, more effective SEND system for children, young people, and families.