

Practice guide

Family Help & Children's Social Care

Integration- Designated Social Care Officer Support, Liverpool

Background, purpose and rationale

The DSCO role was introduced in Liverpool following a 2019 SEND inspection that highlighted a lack of integration between SEND and social care. The role, championed by the Council for Disabled Children, aims to bridge this gap by improving understanding of legal duties, processes, and collaborative planning. It ensures social care input into Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans is timely, high-quality, and child centred. The DSCO sits within the Workforce and Practice Development Unit, supporting training, quality assurance, and strategic alignment across services. The role is both strategic and practice-focused, influencing policy, training, and service delivery.

What we did to improve systems and processes

The Designated Social Care Officer (DSCO) role in Liverpool was newly established, requiring a foundational approach to define its purpose and impact. Key early actions included aligning with the local SEND strategy, raising awareness across teams, and ensuring compliance with the SEND Code of Practice. The DSCO became embedded in strategic boards and developed an action plan to guide priorities and measure impact. A major focus was improving the quality and timeliness of social care advice for EHC needs assessments through co-produced guidance, training, and audits. The DSCO also addressed risks in short breaks provision and chaired the Preparing for Adulthood group, developing a local strategy and toolkit. Workforce development was supported through a SEND Community of Practice, and the DSCO contributed to various forums and panels to maintain a broad understanding of local needs.

What was the impact?

- Strategic Alignment and Operational Impact - the DSCO role has been instrumental in aligning strategic priorities with operational practice across SEND and social care. It has enabled the identification of inconsistencies, promoted equity, and supported a culture of collaboration and continuous improvement.
- Strategic Integration and Cultural Change - the DSCO's visible presence and regular engagement have embedded SEND awareness across children's social care, family help, and youth services. This has fostered improved communication and mutual understanding among professionals.
- Governance - the dual strategic and practice-based nature of the DSCO role requires careful boundary management. This has been achieved through intentional engagement with boards, panels, and forums, ensuring the role is respected and effectively integrated within Liverpool's children's services.
- Quality Assurance - quarterly audit feedback on the quality of social care advice is routinely submitted to the SEND Performance and Quality Group. This process has contributed to measurable improvements in both the quality and timeliness of advice.

- Enhanced Triage and Protocols - dedicated EHC social care needs triage officer has been embedded within the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). This is supported by a formal protocol between SEND, children and adult social care, ensuring consistent and proportionate responses to requests for social care advice in EHC assessments and reviews.
- Strengthening of Short Breaks Provision - the short breaks offer has been significantly enhanced, with broadened access to direct payments and commissioning of expanded external agency provision delivering a 50% reduction in the waiting list. Revisions to eligibility criteria, direct payments policy, and step up/down protocols are under consultation.
- Respite and Fostering Initiatives - supported the remodelling of overnight respite provision and a short breaks fostering campaign has been developed to increase throughput and address unmet needs.
- Preparation for Adulthood (PfA) - termly PfA hub marketplace event offering coordinated information on benefits, housing, adult social care, post-16 education, employment, and travel training. A revised EHC review template and PfA toolkit have been developed to support holistic planning and active participation from children, families, and professionals.
- Workforce Development and Training - SEND Community of Practice continues to support monthly professional development and is now embedded in the induction process for new children's services staff. Ongoing training in legal literacy - including the Mental Capacity Act and Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards (DoLS) - is being developed to support inclusive education.

Resources

Guidance for writing EHCP slides
 Preparation for Adulthood Development Plan
 Role of DSCO Liverpool slides
 Social Care Advice slides
 Social Care Advice Checklist

Find out more

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