**Independent Chair’s update on SEND Improvement Board meeting.**

**21st May 2025**

Representatives from the SEND Improvement Board attended the latest meeting on 21st May. All papers from the board can be found on the Local Offer website (link).

**What is the purpose of the Board?**

The purpose of the board is to bring strategic oversight and to hold those with responsibility to account for the improvement of special educational needs and disabilities services across Suffolk. Senior leaders recognise that children and families have an entitlement to a better experience, and they are committed to making the improvements needed. The SEND Local Area Partnership comprises Suffolk County Council, NHS Suffolk and North-East Essex Integrated Care Board and NHS Norfolk and Waveney Integrated Care Board, Suffolk Parent Carer Forum, schools and settings, colleges, health providers and the voluntary sector.

**A visit from students at Riverwalk School**

It was very special to welcome students from Riverwalk School in Bury St Edmunds to our meeting. The school caters for pupils aged 4 – 19 who have severe learning difficulties, profound and multiple learning difficulties, as well as those with autism. Students told us what was important to them at school, as well as their aspirations for the future.

It was wonderful to hear from the students, who all spoke so confidently, and they were thanked wholeheartedly for taking the time to attend. Their important views will feed into the ongoing improvement work.

**Update from the Suffolk Parent Carer Forum**

Claire Smith, Chair of the Suffolk Parent Carer Forum began her update to the Board with the good news that the forum has reported a 36% membership growth and a 38% social media growth in the last financial year.

The forum shared what they felt has been working well. This included the success of their focus groups, with parents and carers valuing the opportunity to share their experiences, ask questions and take part in coproduction. The forum reported that they have good, open lines of communication with the SEND partnership and also value the opportunities to be on interview panels.

The forum also shared what hadn’t been working well. This included issues relating to communication about staffing, provision within EHCP’s being secured, complaints handling and complaint’s data and the letters being sent to parent’s and carers being difficult to understand.

It is acknowledged that any progress being made by services is not yet impacting on parent’s and carers. We need the improvement work to make a positive difference to families’ lived experiences and therefore it is agreed that there is still a long way to go.

**An update on the Priority Action Plan:**

There are two priority areas and a number of improvement areas within the action plan. This was the plan agreed by the Department for Education following the Ofsted and CQC inspection of November 2023.

The Board receives an update on this work at every meeting. Today we heard about exclusions; communications strategy; complaints; EHCP Quality Assurance; and the Coproduction Charter

**An update on exclusions:**

The Board received an update on school exclusions and the plans that are in place to address it. Every exclusion is recognised as a system failure, prompting continued efforts to strengthen support.

As of April 2025, Suffolk’s education performance data highlights key trends in exclusions, elective home education (EHE), attendance, and inspection outcomes.

While the overall number of upheld permanent exclusions has fallen this academic year, exclusions for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) remain a concern. Exclusions involving children with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) have increased whilst for those on SEN Support, the number has decreased.

The number of children electively home educated continues to rise, reaching 2,040 in April 2025, up from 1,639 the previous year. This includes 210 children with an EHCP, 118 undergoing an Education, Health and Care Needs Assessment (EHCNA), and 304 receiving SEN Support.

School attendance has shown encouraging improvement, rising from 90.8% overall in April 2023 to 93% by April 2025. Attendance for children with an EHCP stands at 84.9%, while those with SEN Support have reached 89.9%. Persistent absence has decreased from 24.28% to 17.3%, though remains high among EHCP pupils (37.1%) and those on SEN Support (27.1%). Severe absence is currently 2.4% overall.

School leaders report having to use exclusion as a last resort when they would rather not exclude children, often when situations reach crisis point. They highlight the growing challenge of meeting pupils’ diverse and complex needs within existing school provision. Parents and carers echo these concerns, stating that more needs to be done to ensure that current school provision adequately supports their children.

In response, the Local Authority (LA) is offering a range of support measures. This includes approximately £13 million in pre-EHCP funding to provide earlier interventions for children with Special Educational Needs (SEN). The LA also deploys direct services such as the Education Access Team, Standards and Excellence Team, Specialist Education Services, and Family Support to assist schools where exclusions are at risk. Additionally, guidance promoting inclusive practice has been developed and shared with schools and settings.

There are a number of actions being taken to achieve an Inclusive Education Community and this work will continue with a fuller report coming to the next Board meeting in July.

**Communications Strategy:**

Also highlighted within the Priority Action Plan, the Board heard how a Local Area Partnership Strategic Communication Plans and Communication Charter are being drafted. The plan will support the partnership’s development of core messages, effective information sharing and updates for families, schools and the wider workforce serving the community. Likewise, the coproduction of a communications charter, outlining the behaviour, principles and expectations of all communications, is needed to address feedback from families about the responsiveness of services around the waiting times and general email correspondence. The charter will sit alongside statutory service standards and be monitored through ongoing performance measurements and satisfaction polls.

The progress of this work will continue to be reported to the board.

**SEND Complaints:**

Next on the agenda, the board heard a summary of how complaints in Inclusion and SEND are tracked and the actions in place to reduce complaints and increase parental satisfaction.

A Quality and Performance Board has been established with complaints data and themes identified as a workstream. The aim is to be more relational in the responses that are made to complaints with better communication with families.

There are more complaints this year compared to the last two years. This is indicative of issues not being resolved effectively at an early stage and therefore this is a key area of focus for the Board who are looking to see significant improvements in the way complaints are handled.

A number of next steps have been identified including a data dashboard to be explored and monitoring and sharing of complaint numbers, themes and actions; all EHC coordinators to contact schools and parents/carers; and complaints officer within Inclusion to meet regularly with AD Inclusion for rapid improvement and decisions.

**Quality Assurance of Education, Health and Care Plans**

An important subject and one which comes before the Board frequently is the quality of the Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) produced.

The Board heard what is being done in this space. This included the creation of a SEND Quality and Performance Board and a Multi-agency SEND EHCP Quality Assurance Group. A EHCP Quality Assurance Framework has also been drafted and is currently with local area partners for wider consultation and development. Additional sampling of EHCPs and specific focus audit meetings have also been agreed. This will help to drive up the quality of plans and annual reviews so that children’s needs can better be met.

Areas where things weren’t working well included SPCF’s concerns about co-production of the framework and this is being addressed; scrutiny of the existing EHC plans has evidenced that the overall quality of EHC plans continue to require improvement; and finally that the new Quality Assurance Framework needs to be implemented with urgency.

**Coproduction Strategy:**

There is also work ongoing to produce a coproduction strategy within the Priority Action Plan. The Board heard that the charter and action plan to support the partnership’s approach to coproduction ensures making sure that parents, carers, children and young people feel included, empowered and have influence. The charter will outline the partnership’s behaviour, principles and expectations in relation to coproduction.

I hope this update is helpful. The next board meeting is 16th July 2025 with a focus on attendance, result of the parent carer survey and work around preparing for adulthood.

Thanks,

**Kathryn Boulton**

**Independent chair of the SEND Improvement Boa**