

## **Independent Chair's update on SEND Improvement Board meeting.**

**16<sup>th</sup> July 2025**

Representatives from the SEND Improvement Board attended the latest meeting on 16<sup>th</sup> July 2025.

### **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.

### **Key discussions at the Board included:**

- First hand discussions with pupils from the Bobby Robson School school council
- Updates on progress against the Priority Action Plan
- The importance of early identification for children with SEND

### **The young person's voice: A visit from SEND pupils**

For each board meeting it is important that we include – wherever possible - the voices and experiences of young people and children with SEND in Suffolk. We all recognise that they have a lot to tell us about their day-to-day experiences at school, their aspirations for the future and what we can do better to help them.

This board meeting we were lucky enough to welcome representatives from the school council of the Sir Bobby Robson school in Ipswich. The school caters for children and young people aged 8 to 16 who have social, emotional and mental health needs and Autism. The students were asked how we can make things better for them at school and what aspirations they have for the future. Some of those examples included having access to college courses and potential careers earlier, a desire to have a greater

selection of non-academic courses and having a chill out zone with activities to suit different students, such as ropes to climb or a quiet area. It was wonderful to hear from the students about their hobbies and future career ambitions including being a brick layer, a politician or an archivist.

### **Updates on progress against the Priority Action Plan**

A standing agenda within the SEND Improvement Board is the improvement progress being made the Priority Action Plan.

Some of the things working well included:

- The number of children and young people who have waited the longest for an EHCP has reduced.
- This has reduced the waiting time for children, this means those who are entering the system should have the support they need within 20 weeks.
- The number of draft plans issued in the first six months of 2025 is almost as much as the entirety of 2024.
- Engagement with Local Area Partners is increasing to allow for greater support in drafting plans.

A thorough and at-times challenging discussion followed about the quality of the EHCPs sent to families. Claire Smith from the Suffolk Parent Carer Forum reported that she was seeing an increase in the number of concerns and complaints raised about the standard of plans produced. This was acknowledged as a problem by SEND leaders who accepted that timeliness of plans, whilst currently improving, should not be at the detriment of quality.

Measures to improve and monitor the quality of EHCPs include a structured approach:

- Level 1: Assurance that across the partnership all partners are carrying out internal QA processes for Advice. (e.g. gained through audit reports)
- Level 2: Auditing of SCC EHC Plans to record number of plans classed as good prior to sign off

- Level 3: Quality Assurance Audit Cycle (10% of plans are QA'd in addition to level 2 every 6 weeks). Using the same Audit tool the LAP representatives complete a joint thematic approach
- Level 4: System Leaders jointly QA a plan every 12 weeks.

Next steps include an operational audit tool to be drafted in July and then tested and finalised before the quality of plans will be formally reported on from September 2025.

The Board were also updated on the situation with phased transfers of children and young people. This is the transition between settings, such as nursery to primary school or primary school to secondary school. On the day of the meeting there were 184 young people who had a phase transfer review before the end of May 2025 who do not have a named placement for September. This number is expected to fall every day as provision is found before the start of the Autumn term. The Board was told that case officers are in regular discussions with families, so they are kept informed.

### **An update from the Suffolk Parent Carer Forum**

As a key coproduction partner, an update is given from by Claire Smith, chairman of the Suffolk Parent Carer Forum at each Board meeting. A summary of this update now follows.

The forum has planned focus groups on alternative provision, permanent exclusions, the Local Offer website, Therapeutic Thinking, and a SENDIASS information session.

Claire raised concerns about some weaknesses in partnership working, which included the forum not being included in the coproduction and procurement of the new autism and ADHD support services for Suffolk. She also raised similar concerns as those already flagged in the progress report about the quality of EHCPs, including failure to include family-requested amendments; premature finalisation of plans; inaccurate reflection of EP reports; breached statutory timescales; ignored or dismissive responses to family emails; and missing or misplaced information.

Claire also discussed the results of their annual carer parent survey. This year 255 parents and carers took part. One of the most noteworthy elements was the question on the state of the mental health of parents and carers. 142 people reported a decline in

their mental health, 56%, with 82 people saying it had stayed the same. This is a worrying position and one which needs to be monitored.

### **The importance of early identification for children with SEND**

Finally, the board heard from Samantha Porter, Whitehouse Community Primary School SENDCo and Children's Endeavour Trust SEND Lead who spoke about the importance of early identification of children with SEND. The benefits of early identification are widely recognised – identifying need at the earliest point, and then making effective provision, improves long-term outcomes for children. The SEND Code of Practice (2014) is clear that early identification of children with special education needs should be a priority. After all, the earlier that difficulties are identified, the earlier that intervention and support can be initiated to meet them.

SENDCos across the trust shared what they thought was working well:

- SENDCos on the ground are proficient at identifying need early
- Improvements in work (in nurseries and early years settings) identifying need earlier, before pupils start school
- Health Visitors doing more ANT referrals in nursery
- Some EHCPs are better
- In some cases, there are more face-to-face assessments

They also shared what could work even better:

- Diagnoses were quicker (it can take 18 months)
- Education and Health professionals always had consensus about need for an EHCP
- SENDCos could support parents more:
  - With paperwork (for example the NDD form)
  - To decipher personal budgets
  - Understanding the Local Offer and accessing Specialist Provision
  - Helping EAL parents understand system and information

The Board agreed to take these points on board.

The next board meeting is provisionally booked for September 10<sup>th</sup>.

Thanks,

**Kathryn Boulton**

**Independent chair of the SEND Improvement Board**