



Department
for Education

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Sarah-Jane Smedmor, Executive Director of Children's Services
Dr Ed Garrett, Chief Executive, Suffolk and North East Essex Integrated Care Board

16 July 2025

Dear Sarah-Jane and Ed,

Deep Dive into Area of Priority Action 1: Governance and Leadership

Thank you for the Local Area Partnership's ("the partnership") attendance and participation in the recent deep dive process. This includes the meeting on 11 June 2025 to review progress made against the first area for priority action (APA), focusing on governance and leadership:

"The LAP should work more collaboratively and effectively to improve strategic planning. This needs to deliver systems with measurable impact that will create better experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND.

- the robustness and impact of governance,
- the rigour of quality assurance approaches, so that these give the information leaders require to address weaknesses effectively,
- the frequency and quality of multi-agency working."

The purpose of the deep dive evidence gathering and subsequent meeting was:

- a. To assess the progress the partnership is making against the selected APA.
- b. Identify areas of possible slippage.
- c. Assess impact of the progress made and confidence levels in making a positive difference to the lived experience of children and young people with SEND.
- d. Agree priority recommendations to focus on to make rapid progress against the APA.

In preparation for the meeting, Helen Chester and Louise Warren met with a range of practitioners and providers to discuss progress and review a range of data provided by the partnership. Helen and Louise would like to extend their thanks to the local area partnership for arranging the meeting and completing the survey. Their findings were presented to those at the meeting and are summarised below.

There is strong consensus across the partnership that significant improvements in relationships and developing a culture of trust have been achieved, which has been furthered through the appointment of permanent senior leaders within the local authority. This is evidenced by the maturity of conversations, the local authority's ongoing work to strengthen the handling of complaints, and positive feedback about being heard from children, young people and families. The partnership has

demonstrated a shared commitment to building on these foundations to ensure that governance structures deliver consistent, measurable impact for those they serve. The governance structures have been redesigned, and work continues to implement and establish these. It was acknowledged however that while substantial progress has been made in establishing trust and collaborative working, these improvements are not yet consistent across all areas and levels of the system and their impact is not fully filtering through to children, young people and their families.

Key findings:

- Governance structures show more open and honest dialogue and effective leadership from Kathryn Boulton as the independent chair of the board. Many partners however do not fully understand where they fit within governance structures, and this limits their ability to contribute strategically. There also needs to be more visibility of board-level agenda setting and how priorities are agreed. The sub-groups feeding into the Board need to be embedded and membership of these groups and the Board should be reviewed to ensure that the skills and expertise of partners are utilised effectively at all levels of governance.
- The changes in leadership have created improved relationships, but these remain largely between individuals rather than being embedded as institutional partnerships. This creates vulnerability during periods of change, particularly with the upcoming Integrated Care Board (ICB) reconfiguration.
- There are strong examples of effective communication, including the welcome practice of no emails to parents and carers after 3pm on Fridays. However, this strength of communication is not universal across the partnership, with families still reporting issues at operational levels.
- The partnership has significant specialist resources across education, health and social care, but these are not being optimally integrated into decision-making and accountability structures.
- The partnership's focus remains too often on activity rather than measurable impact for children and families. Current approaches to co-production and feedback loops, while improved, lack systematic implementation that would enable children, young people and families to understand how and where to escalate matters and receive updates on progress.

Recommendations:

- Continue building on the quality of personal relationships while ensuring they become embedded as institutional partnerships that can withstand changes in personnel. This is particularly important given the upcoming ICB reconfiguration.
- Make better use of specialist roles and professionals across the partnership by bringing them into decision making and accountability structures more effectively. This includes better utilisation of education specialists and designated professionals at both strategic and operational levels.
- Establish more systematic feedback loops with children, young people and families so they understand how and where to escalate matters and receive regular updates on how issues are being addressed. This should move

beyond individual examples of good practice to systematic approaches.

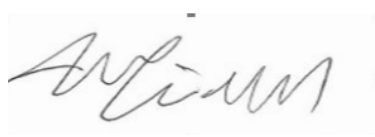
- Evolve the communication strategy to ensure the right messages are given to the right people at the right time. This should address the current inconsistency where strategic improvements are not yet being felt by frontline practitioners and families at operational levels.
- Provide clearer guidance to partners about their roles and responsibilities within governance structures, including more transparent processes for agenda setting and priority agreement. Develop terms of reference that help everyone understand how different groups and establishments connect.
- Systematise the approach to monitoring impact rather than just activity, including the development of highlight reports that focus on outcomes for children and families. This should be accompanied by new mechanisms to enable the board to see how their challenge leads to measurable impact.
- Develop the partnership's story of change to communicate with and engage practitioners such as SENCOs, ensuring they understand their role in delivering the strategic vision.
- Ensure operational subgroups have clear accountability for delivering change decisions made at board level, with effective two-way dialogue between practitioners and strategic leaders.

Next steps

The partnership has committed to reviewing the Priority Action Plan to focus more on impact rather than activity and developing wider strategic approaches that go beyond the Priority Action Plan requirements. The July improvement board meeting will be an important step for advancing these discussions. A stock take will also be held with Department for Education officials in the autumn to assess progress against these recommendations and the overall improvement journey.

Thank you to all parties for their ongoing participation and commitment to improving outcomes for children and young people with SEND in Suffolk.

Yours sincerely,



Jonathan Fairclough

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