



Department
for Education



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

19 December 2025

Dear Sarah-Jane and Ed,

SUFFOLK LOCAL AREA PARTNERSHIP SEND STOCKTAKE MEETING: REVIEW OF PRIORITY ACTION PLAN (PAP) AND STRATEGIC PLAN

Thank you for attending the stocktake meeting on 3 November 2025 to review the progress made against your PAP and Strategic Plan since the Area SEND inspection in November 2023. We are particularly grateful for the contributions from representatives of the Parent Carer Forum (PCF), local authority officers, Integrated Care Board (ICB) and school leaders who attended the meeting.

The partnership provided a comprehensive overview of work undertaken and demonstrated a shared commitment to improving experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND across Suffolk. We heard that the partnership is developing a Local Area Inclusion Plan (LAIP) to replace the PAP, which will bring together all strands of improvement work into a comprehensive framework for delivering better outcomes. The partnership acknowledged that while considerable activity has taken place, and improvements are evidenced in terms of timeliness and reduction of complaints, too many families are yet to feel the benefit of this. There are also some planned activities that have yet to start but steps for effective action are being developed to address this. The partnership therefore needs to progress all aspects of its plans and translate these improvements into measurable impact for children and young people (CYP) and their families.

This joint letter provides a summary of the discussions held at the stocktake meeting, documenting specific feedback from participants on the Areas for Priority Action and Areas for Improvement related to 'systemic failings' identified in the SEND inspection report. Please see Annex A for a full list of actions.

Area for Priority Action 1: The Local Area Partnership (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. In particular they should urgently improve:

- **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 management of transitions and planning for adulthood for children and young people, starting in the earliest years, and across services in education, health and care, including putting steps in place to reduce NEET, so that they are better supported to lead fulfilling lives.**

The SEND Improvement Board now provides clearer strategic oversight with improved reporting and focused agendas. Governance structures are identifying issues and driving action effectively. Evidence was provided in the meeting of this. For example, when the board identified concerning exclusions data, a working group was established with strategic partners, including school settings, to develop a shared vision for belonging and inclusion, defining what success will look like and identifying the actions and milestones needed to achieve this. The partnership recognises that reducing exclusions requires strengthening inclusion across the whole system and is monitoring other metrics such as elective home education to ensure improvements are genuine. Furthermore, following a challenge from PCF about the lack of accurate data for children not in school, the LAP listened and took effective action by identifying appropriate workstreams to tackle this issue. Now accurate data is being reported to governance boards, increasing the understanding of where children are each day, thereby strengthening accountability.

The stocktake meeting heard that quality assurance frameworks are being strengthened, with a new EHCP focused audit programme which has strong engagement from team managers. Multi-agency working has also been enhanced through weekly senior leader meetings and a joint SEND transformation lead reporting to both the Local Authority and ICB, ensuring genuine integration. The partnership is also increasingly using language focused on empowering children and families, reflective of a shift towards more family centred approaches that prioritise lived experiences. The council has established what it feels is the strongest senior leadership team in children's services they have had.

The March 2025 deep dive into preparing for adulthood (PfA) and transitions identified significant concerns with this and related services. A strategy which addresses these concerns was not presented at the meeting. We heard that the partnership recognises the urgency and understands that strong and effective action is needed. The LAP is developing a strategy to be presented to the SEND Improvement Board following the appointment of an experienced PfA strategic lead. This work must accelerate so the strategy can feed into the LAIP.

Next steps - The partnership will:

- Produce the LAIP by 29 January 2026 to replace the current PAP.
- Present its strategy for PfA and transitions to the SEND Improvement Board on 26 March 2026, clearly setting out how improvements will be delivered from early years through to adulthood. Specific measures of success, timelines, and how concerns raised during the March 2025 deep dive will be addressed.
- Continue to strengthen quality assurance by developing a framework that takes into account all aspects of the SEND system, with regular reporting to the SEND Improvement Board on quality assurance findings and actions taken.
- Ensure governance structures remain stable and effective in terms of holding partners to account through periods of change.

Area for Priority Action 2: LAP leaders should cooperate to take urgent action to improve the timeliness and quality of the statutory EHC plan processes, EHC plan needs assessments, and EHC plans and annual reviews, particularly using annual reviews to amend the quality of existing EHC plans where required. This should ensure that plans meaningfully capture the views and aspirations of children and young people with SEND and their families, so that they get the right support at the right time.

We heard that the partnership has made significant progress in reducing the backlog of EHCPs, with 47 children waiting over 52 weeks. The remaining cases are long-standing and complex so are being addressed by a specialist team. This represents a significant achievement given the substantial growth in the number of plans being maintained, from approximately 9,000 at the time of inspection to 11,600 currently. The partnership has provided assurance that the backlog of EHCPs will be cleared by January 2026. However, the partnership acknowledges that timeliness alone is insufficient. The PCF emphasised that families do not always feel their views are meaningfully reflected in plans and plans sometimes do not always result in the right support at the right time. This gap between process improvements and families lived experiences must be addressed as a priority. The partnership accepts this feedback and is strengthening co-production throughout the EHCP process, with particular focus on using annual reviews to amend plans where quality improvements are needed. The partnership is also aware that while far fewer families are waiting for the support they need, too many continue to wait an unacceptably long time.

Next steps - The partnership will:

- Provide an update on progress with the backlog of EHCPs by 29 January 2026, confirming the number of outstanding assessments over 52 weeks and over 30 weeks.
- Continue to address PCF concerns about communication, delays, provision not being specified in finalised EHCPs, children not receiving the provision in their plans, and tribunal procedures to ensure families feel their children matter from first contact.
- Provide assurance by 29 January 2026 on when they will achieve national average for EHCP timeliness with clear milestones for reaching this target.

Area for Improvement 1: Leaders across the partnership should use performance data and information effectively to inform their evaluation, sufficiency planning and joint commissioning of SEND services.

Securing accurate performance data has been a challenge for the partnership since the inspection. Evidence was provided in the meeting that the partnership now has developed more comprehensive approaches to collecting performance data across education, health and social care. Work will now begin on systematic analysis of this data to identify trends and inform strategic decision making. Regular reporting to the SEND Improvement Board covers key performance indicators and trends, identifying pressure points and informing strategic planning. Educational attainment data shows that children with EHCPs are performing at or above national averages, but children with SEND support are performing below, indicating a need for more work on graduated approaches and early intervention. Schools and education settings have a key role to play in strengthening mainstream inclusion, which would also help reduce reliance on alternative provision and specialist placements. The LAIP will provide the framework for translating these data insights into action.

The partnership lacks detailed information regarding sufficiency of places, in terms of overall numbers, types of places and quality. We heard that a comprehensive sufficiency strategy is being developed for completion in December 2025, informed by detailed analysis of current provision, projected need, and gaps. We heard that the partnership is adopting a broad definition of sufficiency that includes not just specialist places but also resources and support to enable children to remain in mainstream settings, and early intervention to reduce demand for specialist provision. To support this, a dedicated Alternative Provision team is being created to track attendance and engagement, working

intensively with the most vulnerable cohort. Finally, we heard that joint commissioning arrangements have been strengthened, with improved coordination between the local authority and health partners facilitated by the joint transformation lead role.

Next steps - The partnership will:

- Complete its sufficiency strategy by 31 December 2025, which will be co-produced with key strategic partners, including education, health and social care settings. The strategy will be informed by robust data analysis and will clearly identify gaps in provision and plans to address them, including long-term planning.
- Provide data showing the number of children with EHCPs without school places since the time of inspection, to enable assessment of whether the situation is improving or deteriorating by 30 January 2026.

Area for Improvement 2: The LAP should engage effectively and widely with children and young people and their families, developing effective communications systems, and acting to address parents' and carers' concerns at an early stage, to reduce dissatisfaction and reduce the need for parents and carers to have to follow formal routes.

The PCF representative engaged fully in the strategic discussion during the stocktake meeting, emphasising that despite increased engagement, families continue to experience significant frustration with aspects of the SEND system. This is particularly around statutory processes, transport, delays in issuing draft EHCPs, finalisation before families make representations, and tribunal procedures. The partnership accepted these concerns and is committed to capturing the voices of CYP and families through multiple channels and strengthening how it acts on feedback, ensuring engagement translates into tangible improvements in families' experiences.

A communication strategy is being developed for completion by the end of November 2025, focusing on coordination across the partnership and demonstrating impact. A new communications manager has been appointed to lead this work, and the partnership is recruiting to address the gap left by the loss of the co-production lead. The partnership plans to offer regular quarterly meetings with local MPs, reflecting the parliamentary interest in SEND services locally. The communications strategy will include engagement with staff across the partnership, seeking their views on how to drive improvements and embedding the cultural change needed to ensure families feel heard and valued from first contact.

The LAP shared that the Intervention Support Funding will support locality-based events from January 2026 focused on understanding lived experiences around preparing for adulthood, enabling the partnership to gather feedback directly from families. A Belonging and Inclusion Conference is planned for 30 January 2026 at Trinity Park Ipswich, bringing together education leaders to inform the development of a belonging and inclusion strategy. CYP will actively participate, making it a meaningful co-produced event that will directly inform the LAIP.

Educational representatives have strengthened their role on the SEND Improvement Board and now attend the SEND Operations Group for operational impact. They are creating feedback reports for the board, meeting beforehand to ensure voices of all settings they represent are heard. The Partnership for Inclusion of Neurodiversity in Schools (PINS) pathfinder group brings together approximately 30 schools, demonstrating momentum about ensuring complex and vulnerable children remain in full-time provision.

Next steps - The partnership will:

- Complete its communication strategy by the end of November 2025, ensuring the focus on coordination across the partnership and demonstrating impact.
- Ensure that the Belonging and Inclusion Conference on 30 January 2026 and the ISF funded locality events result in clear actions and outcomes, with progress reported back to families and stakeholders. This should include how feedback from these events will be used to inform service development.

Area for Improvement 3: Leaders across the LAP should ensure that providers of services for children with social and emotional well-being, mental health and neurodivergent conditions work jointly to meet the needs of and improve outcomes in these areas for children with SEND.

We heard that the partnership has prioritised work to improve neurodevelopmental pathways, developing clearer pathways for accessing support while waiting for assessment. Neurodevelopmental workshops have been delivered to support families with neurodivergent children. Between September 2024 and August 2025, over 2,500 families registered to access online information, with workshops and webinars delivered by clinical psychologists from mental health providers. For young people aged 18 to 25, a Recovery College provides support, webinars and one-to-one coaching for those waiting for ADHD or autism assessment, with approximately 200 young people accessing this offer. Feedback has been positive, with families who joined workshops finding them helpful, feeling less alone, and increasing their knowledge and confidence in supporting their young person. Young people reporting feeling emotionally validated, hopeful and better equipped through Recovery College. The PCF highlighted ongoing concerns about neurodevelopmental pathway waiting times and children who mask being rejected from assessments.

Mental health support pathways have been strengthened with improved coordination between mental health services and other services. The Dynamic Support Register and Care, Education and Treatment Review (CERT) processes are well embedded with effective multi-agency working. The partnership now has self-referral for the Dynamic Support Register, and the rate of referral to specialist inpatient mental health settings is extremely low. Where young people are admitted to these specialist settings with navigator or transforming care child status, there is no readmission, demonstrating the effectiveness of system working in supporting discharge and community reintegration.

Next steps - The partnership will:

- Continue and expand neurodevelopmental workshops and the Recovery College, monitoring impact through quality-of-life measures and feedback to ensure families receive appropriate support while waiting for assessments.
- Address PCF concerns about neurodevelopmental pathway waiting times and ensure appropriate assessment of children who mask, with clear guidance for schools and SENCOs on identification and referral processes.

Thank you to all partners for their ongoing commitment to improving SEND services across Suffolk. The partnership's honest reflections on progress and challenges, and willingness to engage openly with families and professionals, provides a strong foundation for continued improvement. The focus must now be on ensuring that effective action has been taken to translate activity into measurable impact which makes a real difference to the lived experiences of children, young people and their families.

Recommendations

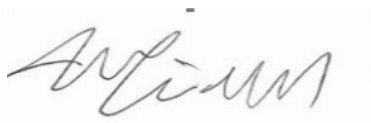
Based on the discussion at the stocktake meeting and review of evidence provided, we suggest the following recommendations to strengthen the partnership's approach to continuous improvement:

- The LAIP should be informed by an evaluation of the PAP, capturing lessons learned on what worked well, improvements and informing the aspirations for the LAIP.
- Clear milestones need to be developed for tracking progress and impact of the LAIP and governance boards which should actively hold partners to account for delivery against these milestones.
- Presentations to the governance boards need to be based on impact achieved, impact intended and how this will be monitored. Ensuring activity is linked to outcomes demonstrates the partnership is taking effective action to address areas identified in the inspection.
- There is a strong continuous improvement story emerging which needs to be captured more systematically and communicated to all stakeholders. This should include documenting improvement journeys, sharing good practice, and ensuring CYP and families, education settings and frontline staff can see how their feedback is shaping improvements.
- Schools and education settings to take ownership of strengthening inclusive practice, building on what works and working in partnership with the LA to support settings that need to develop.

We will continue to review progress against the Areas for Priority Action and Areas for Improvement as outlined in the Improvement Notice issued to Suffolk County Council on 28 May 2024. Your next review to assess further progress against your strategic plan will take place at the end of the spring term.

Your DfE commissioned SEND Advisor, Helen Chester, and NHS England East of England SEND Lead, Louise Warren, will continue to offer support and challenge in the meantime. Please do not hesitate to contact them if you wish to discuss any aspect of this letter further.

Yours sincerely,



Jonathan Fairclough

Head of Delivery for Suffolk, Norfolk and Cambridgeshire
East of England, Regions Group



Anneliese Hillyer-Thake

Assistant Director for Nursing, Quality and Safeguarding
NHS East of England

We are copying this letter to: Nicola Beach (Chief Executive, SCC), Lisa Nobes (Director NHS, ICB), Sharon Muldoon (Director of Education, SCC), Anna Mears (Director of SEND at EAST), Daniel Jones (CEO Children's Endeavour Trust), Garry Joyce (Assistant Director CYP, ICB), Hayley Cullimore (Head of Inclusion), Hayley Griffin (Service Director for Social Care, SCC), Josette Kennington (Head of SEND Transformation, SCC), Julia Grainger (Interim Assistant Director Education, SCC), Kathryn Searle (Deputy Director of Nursing, ICB), Rebecca Hulme (Director, ICB), Sue Willgoss (SPCF), Trudi Rose-Porter (Director- Transition, Foundation and Inclusive Learning), Louise Warren (SEND Advisor NHS England-EoE), Helen Chester (DfE Commissioned SEND Advisor), Becky Taylor (Deputy Director for East of England, DfE), Jess Clarke (Team Leader for Suffolk, DfE), Chloe Worboyes (SEND Case Lead, DfE)

Annex A: Summary of Next steps and Actions

Area	Actions for the partnership	Lead	Timescale
	Produce the LAIP to replace the current PAP.	LAP	29/01/26
APA1	Present its strategy for PfA and transitions to the SEND Improvement Board, clearly setting out how improvements will be delivered from early years through to adulthood. Specific measures of success, timelines, and how concerns raised during the March 2025 deep dive will be addressed.	Local Authority - PfA strategic lead	26/03/26
APA1	Continue to strengthen quality assurance by developing a framework that takes into account all aspects of SEND system, with regular reporting to the SEND Improvement Board on quality assurance findings and actions taken.	LAP	22/05/26
APA1	Ensure governance structures remain stable and effective in terms of holding partners to account through periods of change	LAP	Ongoing
APA2	Provide an update on progress with the backlog of EHCPs, confirming the number of outstanding assessments over 52 weeks and over 30 weeks.	Local Authority	29/01/26
APA2	Continue to address PCF concerns about communication, delays, provision not being specified in finalised EHCPs, children not receiving the provision in their plans, and tribunal procedures to ensure families feel their children matter from first contact.	LAP	Ongoing
APA2	Provide assurance on when they will achieve national average for EHCP timeliness with clear milestones for reaching this target.	LAP	29/01/26
Afl1	Complete its sufficiency strategy, which will be co-produced with key strategic partners, including education, health and social care settings. The strategy will be informed by robust data analysis and will clearly identify gaps in provision and plans to address them, including long-term planning.	LAP	31/12/26
Afl1	Provide data showing the number of children with EHCPs without school places since the time of inspection, to enable assessment of whether the situation is improving or deteriorating.	Local Authority	30/01/26
Afl2	Complete its communication strategy, ensuring the focus on coordination across the partnership and demonstrating impact.	LAP	28/11/25
Afl2	Ensure that the Belonging and Inclusion Conference on 30 January 2026 and the ISF funded locality events result in clear actions and outcomes, with progress reported back to families and stakeholders. This should include how feedback from these events will be used to inform service development.	LAP	Review at next stocktake review (6 months)

Af13	Continue and expand neurodevelopmental workshops and the Recovery College, monitoring impact through quality-of-life measures and feedback to ensure families receive appropriate support while waiting for assessments.	Health	Review at next stocktake review (6 months)
Af13	Address PCF concerns about neurodevelopmental pathway waiting times and ensure appropriate assessment of children who mask, with clear guidance for schools and SENCOs on identification and referral processes.	Health	Review at next stocktake review (6 months)