

Dear Nicola and Matthew,

This letter is in the form of an advisory note about services for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in Suffolk. I carried out fieldwork between April and September 2023.

1. My Terms of Reference were to:
  - Assist the council in making continued improvements for children with special educational needs and disabilities and improvements in the experience of children and families.
  - Assess that the conditions required for progress remain in place are robust and are having impact.
  - Provide an independent opinion of the effectiveness of reform and provide advice, guidance and best practice, within specific areas if needed.
2. I decided this was best approached through holding a series of collaborative conversations with a cross-section of interested parties in Suffolk. To this end, I met with numerous families, interest groups, professionals and politicians. My thanks are due to them for without exception being honest and solution-focused.
3. I have structured my advice in 5 sections:
  - Leadership
  - Trust and confidence
  - Governance and Accountability
  - Performance Improvement
  - Co-production

## **LEADERSHIP**

4. A DCS today has over 300 statutory responsibilities across Children's Social Care, SEND and Education and it is vital to give all areas appropriate and usually equal attention, focus and oversight.
5. The SEND service would benefit from stronger, visible leadership by senior officers in the delivery of high-quality SEND services and improving levels of pupil attainment. The most senior officers need to be seen as a positive presence and influence 'out there' throughout Suffolk. Political support for SEND improvements has been strong and unwavering.

6. The joint leadership of the Assistant Director for Inclusion Services and the Head of SEND Services works well. The impact of their senior officers needs to be far greater, in order to back them up and to increase the level of trust and confidence amongst parents/carers, interest groups and campaign groups in the way that SEND is led. This can be achieved by being more overtly child and parent focused and through co-production at all levels and across the wider system, including person-centred practice at the level of the individual child. For example, good practice and projects are not always known about. The SEND Programme Board could showcase best practice.
7. Greater attempts could be made to secure knowledge transfer from those local area SEND systems who have scored at Level 1 in recent SEND inspections completed under the new Framework. Greenwich, for example, would be a good local system for the Suffolk partners to connect with for learning purposes.
8. In respect of Education, a far greater presence and leadership about how to improve pupil attainment scores is one of the most urgent corporate leadership tasks facing the County Council. Poor results affect SEND children and young people disproportionately. The County Council should work much more intensively with the Suffolk education community to raise the general level of ambition about this where Suffolk results are adrift from national averages, especially for primary-aged pupils in areas like literacy where Suffolk is in the lowest quartile and lagging behind. On some other measures, Suffolk is within national averages e.g., Attainment 8 scores for secondary pupils with SEND support is in quartile B and for EHCP's in Quartile C.
9. Suffolk is also an outlier for suspensions and exclusions of children with EHCP and SEN support, as shown below.

For pupils with EHCPs for the 2021/22 academic year:

	<b>Exclusion rate</b>	<b>Suspension rate</b>
<b>Suffolk</b>	0.31	19.12
<b>England</b>	0.08	12.98
<b>East Region</b>	0.16	14.85

Pupils with SEN Support:

	<b>Exclusion rate</b>	<b>Suspension rate</b>
<b>Suffolk</b>	0.23	15.02
<b>England</b>	0.15	11.86
<b>East Region</b>	0.16	11.57

10. The huge latent potential for improvements in results across Suffolk needs to be realised. This will help SEND children specifically as they are children first and SEND children second. The LA plays a key role in facilitating individual schools and Academy Trusts to come together to form a strong single education improvement partnership. It is imperative that the most senior leaders sponsor a joined-up and cohesive vision that ensures every child in Suffolk has access to and receives effective education. By doing this, children with SEND ultimately benefit from inclusive schools. Transparent monitoring of delivery should be established that supports senior officers across the relevant agencies to challenge each other

effectively, to ensure a measurable positive impact for children and young people.

11. More effective senior officer leadership of the big issues for SEND is needed, such as challenging schools to offer more places in mainstream schools. SEND inclusivity needs to be thought of by schools as a limiting inspection judgment in all but name.
12. At present success is judged by increasing the number of schools undergoing the Inclusive Quality Mark award. It has taken nearly 3 years to get up to around 60 schools accredited, about 20% of the total number of schools in Suffolk. Whilst this helps, it is tantamount to pleading with schools to sign up to being inclusive. Rapid improvement is needed to find ways and measures of supporting and holding schools to account to be as inclusive as the statute says they must be.

#### Advisory Points

- *Leaders should exercise visible leadership of SEND and continue to build on the work that has started to ensure inclusive schools for all children, including children with SEND.*
- *Leaders should continue work to raise educational achievement through a refreshed partnership, with a renewed vision and strategy owned by all schools, with transparent monitoring of delivery and impact.*

## TRUST AND CONFIDENCE

13. It is hard to measure trust and confidence, even amongst small groups, let alone large networks. At the time of completing this work and subsequent letter, over 7000 children in Suffolk have an EHCP. There is neither an evidence base nor proxy measures about satisfaction or well-being percentages for children or for their parents and carers about the EHCP process.
14. Campaign groups made the point to me that relationships are of secondary importance compared to whether your child is being supported and well educated. In other words, good relationships keep the noise down, but not for very long. Improvements need a shared narrative across the whole, based on an irrefutable evidence base. Trust and confidence need to be built between parents, leaders and officers across the County wide partnership, which includes the County Council, Schools and Health organizations.
15. Co-producing the next steps in SEND service developments will get critics on board, so that they feel heard and so that they have a meaningful role in problem-solving rather than just making up the numbers or to have token seats at the table. For example, the County Council could take more active steps to make the Suffolk Parent Carer Forum (SPCF) successful. At the time of completing this work, Suffolk Parent Care forum (SPCF), the Council's formal parent and carer partner, feel that things are getting worse. Like everyone else, they are under pressure to get results, especially given the historic splits in the parent/carer movement in Suffolk, which means there is as little trust between the splintering factions as there is with officialdom.
16. Councils have a statutory duty to take into consideration the voice of the parent carer forum when designing and commissioning services. This will help SCC to create the conditions for improving levels of trust and confidence going forwards. At the time of these

conversations, nothing was being done tactically to help anyone to be successful. Schools are not taking steps to increase parental confidence in their commitment to SEND. An outcome measure of actions taken is whether they will boost confidence. This does not happen by itself.

17. "Poor communication has been a known issue for years but has not been tackled" is what a manager inside the service told me. A revamped comms and media plan would help, led by the SEND Partnership. For example, some criticisms are myths. Critics use data about SEND Tribunals to make points about Suffolk not caring about whether cases go to Tribunal. The same critics point to parents winning at over 90% of Tribunals. In fact, this success rate is common across the country. The Tribunal rate in Suffolk in 2022 was 1.8% compared with a national average of 2.3% and 29% higher in 2022 than 2019 against a national average increase of 73%. Positive case studies should be made available to the SCC Comms team but there has been a reluctance to do this or to identify, support and empower children, parents and carers who have had good experiences to come forward and tell their story which, told well, are just as compelling as negative stories, if not more so.
18. SEND leaders need to better understand the current experiences of children and young people with SEND and their families and demonstrate how they are working to improve experiences over time. For example:
  - The journey and experience of a child and their family where a request has been made for an assessment for an EHCP.
  - The experience a child has of their review of their EHCP.
  - The experience of a young person as they move into adulthood and their transitions to training and work, adult health services and adult social care services.

#### Advisory Points

- *SCC SEND Leaders should work to improve trust and confidence in SEND services*
- *The SEND Partnership Board should develop a Comms plan, which also has a focus on identifying positive case studies*
- *The SEND Partnership Board should support and empower parents and children who have been supported positively to talk about their experiences and impact, in the public and professional domains*

## GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

19. Most successful local SEND systems have one Board, whatever this is called. Suffolk has 2 – an Accountability Board and a Programme Board. It is more sensible to establish a single Programme Board that has a clear SEND Strategy that then enables partners to focus on improvements and service developments. This would give an opportunity to re-set the governance arrangements based on high trust and transparency, set within a restorative culture of high support and high challenge across the whole system, not just SCC. This could be independently chaired or chaired by a partner agency with SCC providing vice chair support. All partners, including Parent Carer Forums, have a responsibility to deliver the SEND Strategy, and the Board must hold each part of the system to account. The Board needs to have a clear plan to deliver the SEND Strategy, and all involved must have clarity of role and expectations in ensuring it achieves this.
20. The re-set should include the content and frequency of Scrutiny Committees and Member briefings, which should be fewer. Officer time is stretched at all levels, and servicing many committees and meetings takes valuable officer time away from delivering actual service improvement. An annual programme of events could be published in advance, making sure that all the statutory agencies play a part and which includes children, parents and carers. This would be an opportunity to hold to account those parts of the system which are at the present escaping scrutiny.
21. The Children and Families Act 2014 guarantees children and young people with Special Educational Needs or Disabilities the right to mainstream education. This is regardless of whether the child has an EHCP or not. Mainstream schools cannot refuse a child's admission based on the complexity of their needs or disabilities. It is essential therefore, that SCC continues to work and focus on supporting mainstream schools to develop their practice and complete the graduated approach (assess, plan, do, review) effectively. The council has a role to hold all schools to account on behalf of individual children who need to be included and supported. This is one of the main reasons why the leadership of SEND and Education in Suffolk needs to be transformed at the most senior officer level.
22. A related example where an effective Partnership Board can play an important holding to account role is in those children with SEND who are on the edge of school exclusion, either because they are disappearing of their own volition or because they are being permanently excluded. Positive policies could include holding a mandatory multi-agency case conference before an Exclusion to make sure that all agencies contribute to an exclusion prevention plan. Practices which game the system could also be held up to the spotlight, focusing on positive change, such as all manner of off-rolling behaviour, draconian behaviour policies which drive children away and the situation of 'ghost children' who hang around the school edges without ever going in as active students.
23. SCC leaders and school leaders must work together to agree the most effective way to challenge schools constructively to secure results. Too many parents are having to do this without support. Many SEND caseworkers also struggle to persuade schools to take the children they should. This is a serious problem that at present does not appear on any past or forward agendas of the SEND Accountability and Programme Boards.
24. A re-set of the Partnership Board would enable other agencies who are currently invisible in the Boards to play a proper part. The police are a good example. They have a significant role

to play in supporting adolescents with SEND who are at risk of becoming detached from the education mainstream and of becoming more vulnerable as a result, including being at risk of exploitation. The police need to extend their work on vulnerability into SEND, given the disproportionately high number of young people and young adults they arrest with SEND. Becoming involved with SEND strategically is part of the police's crime prevention duty, power and responsibility.

25. Other local statutory agencies have a much clearer role to play than they do now. The ICBs in Suffolk should be operating to the pledge in the NHS constitution (2012), which pledges to:

- provide you with the information and support you need to influence and scrutinise the planning and delivery of NHS services
- work in partnership with you, your family, carers and representatives
- involve you in discussions about planning your care and to offer you a written record of what is agreed if you want one
- encourage and welcome feedback on your health and care experiences and use this to improve services

This pledge could be reworded and adopted by senior officers responsible for SEND provision in Suffolk. The Communication Plan I have suggested could set out how the pledge will be implemented by each agency across the Suffolk SEND system.

26. District and Borough Councils have a role to play in housing, leisure and recreation provision for children and young people with SEND. At present, these agencies are not being required to become formal partners.

27. A SEND Young Peoples Board could be developed which would give children and young people with SEND greater prominence and voice throughout area partnership services.

#### Advisory Points

- *The SEND Accountability Board and SEND Programme Board should be stood down and a re-designed Partnership Board should be established, with new Terms of Reference focused on delivering the SEND Strategy. This would take forward system-wide improvements.*
- *The SEND Strategy 2024 – 2029 should be co-produced with children, parents, carers and the area Education and SEND Partners, which should incorporate any inspection findings. This should be formally launched once approved, to ensure transparency.*
- *These arrangements could then be brought together in an annual Governance and Accountability event that uses strengths based appreciative inquiry approaches to tackle complex issues that inform the action plans for the following year, which then drive successful implementation of the new SEND Strategy.*

## PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT

28. I have been impressed by the huge efforts made over the last 12 months to put in place a coherent practice model which makes the child and family journey easier and more responsive. The fact that there are no stunning improvements to show for it is only because the starting point was so far back.
29. In their June 2023 Progress Review, DfE acknowledged that Suffolk was making considerable progress in the following areas. These are just a sample of improvements they highlighted:
- The new Suffolk Inclusion Toolkit and stronger development of the required graduation response and early identification of SEND
  - The rollout of V-SEND to 40 schools
  - The introduction of the Education Access team, to give more support to children excluded from school Further developing the locality model of care and support
  - The transition to a new case management system
  - Mental Health Support Teams in school expanded
  - The keyworker programme rolled out to 18–25-year-olds
  - More Learning Disability annual health checks (up to 75% in 2022/23)
  - The work of the new Reviews Triage Team and the Resolution and Tribunal officers
30. The task facing SEND leaders is not a simple one. The national structural imbalance between the demand for SEND services and the resources available is deep and widening. The High Needs Block funding per child for SEND in Suffolk is low when compared to other LA's nationally, which means that the overall total budget for SEND support is significantly less in SCC than that in many other LA's and yet the referral rate in Suffolk is 14% higher than the national average. This needs further exploration and deep dive analysis as to why this might be. The Eastern Region is the 2<sup>nd</sup> worst funded region in the country.
31. The increase in EHCP's for young children illustrates the continuous rise in volumes, acuity and complexity. The overall national increase in EHCP's between January 2022 and January 2023 was 9%, but 17% in the early years. An example of rising volumes in Suffolk is the fact that there were 5365 EHCP's in 2021 and over 7000 now – only 2 years later. SEMH (social, emotional and mental health) diagnoses are up by over 40% in the last 2 years. We are in an age of unsustainable double digit increases in demand, waiting lists and delays. In health, waiting lists are the main barrier as much as the lack of a diagnosis but both taken together double the level of disadvantage for SEND children e.g. the 1-year waiting list for a neuro-developmental diagnosis, even though pre-diagnostic support is now available.
32. In two reception classes I visited in the West of Suffolk, 11 out of 21 children in the first school and 21 out of 25 in the second had additional needs. The demand explosion is the single biggest challenge facing Suffolk. This is why it is also a race against time to make significant improvements, so that Suffolk can be as resilient as possible to meet this ongoing challenge.
33. Suffolk's current performance on completing EHCP's within the 20 weeks allowed in law is one of the lowest in the country. This means children are often waiting an unacceptable length of time for the support they need. Suffolk would benefit from the support of a sector-led improvement partner. Liverpool, Hampshire, Bristol and Newham have all increased their performance on EHCP timescales recently and could be sources of sound advice.

34. Improving EHCP performance is difficult. Once an LA gets into a hole, it takes time to get out. Hampshire set themselves a 4-year plan with a year 1 target of 12%. DfE challenged them about this planned rate of progress yet backed down when they saw the size of the backlog of late EHCPs. Hampshire is now delivering on its plan.
35. Workforce shortages are causing acute concern, including the shortage nationally and locally of Educational Psychologists and other key specialists such as Community Paediatricians. SCC must create the conditions that make staff want come to work in Suffolk and to stay, in what will be a seller's market for the foreseeable future.
36. Suffolk's performance on pupil attainment is below the national average, especially for primary age children where Suffolk is in the lower quartile compared to the national averages.
37. Data suggests work needs to start in the early years. Data from the child development outcomes at 2 to 2.5 years (experimental statistics) 2022 to 2023 quarterly release (Feb 2023) indicates that the % of children at or above all area's development is higher in Suffolk than nationally – Suffolk (81.5%), England (79.4%). However, the early years foundation profile shows that the percentage of pupils reaching all early learning goals is below average in 2022. (Lowest quartile – rank 117). Of the 5 goals, Suffolk is most adrift from the national averages in literacy.
38. The tables below for GCSE and A level results show how Suffolk's overall performance is the weakest amongst our statistical neighbours for A levels and one of the weakest for GCSE's. By 2022 and compared with the pre-pandemic 2018, A-C grades fell to one of the lowest in the country relative to other counties. This relative weakness can also be seen in the results for important individual subjects like Maths and English. This gives rise to an additional SEND issue as well because it gives children with special needs a double disadvantage. Poor quality teaching as long been associated with the over-identification of SEND.

GCSE grades in 2022, 6 and above: statistical neighbours			
County	Total no. of grades awarded in county	6 GCSE's	England Average
Suffolk	64,670	37.9	42.7
Somerset	81,030	40.7	42.7
Norfolk	66,805	35.4	42.7
Devon	93,370	40.3	42.7
Cornwall	43,065	36	42.7
Dorset	63,815	44.2	42.7
Shropshire	40,565	38.5	42.7
Lincolnshire	93,165	37.2	42.7
East Sussex	63,845	45.1	42.7
Worcestershire	49,330	40.3	42.7
Gloucestershire	77,475	46.3	42.7



A-level grades for 18-year-olds in 2022, for all subjects at grade C and above, compared to statistical neighbours

County	Total no. of grades awarded in County	Percentage at grade C	England Average
Suffolk	8,445	77.8	82.7
Somerset	12,305	82.7	82.7
Norfolk	8,720	81.5	82.7
Devon	11,355	82.8	82.7
Cornwall	4,660	83.8	82.7
Dorset	9,765	83.1	82.7
Shropshire	6,430	83	82.7
Lincolnshire	10,700	79.9	82.7
East Sussex	10,790	85.7	82.7
Worcestershire	6,835	83.4	82.7
Gloucestershire	13,275	82.9	82.7

## CO-PRODUCTION

39. An example of basic provision not yet in place is a clear 'road map' for parents to help them get from A to B in the SEND system. This is despite a plethora of information on SEND Local Offers. For example, from a concern over a special educational need to an EHCP from moving from school into post 16 education: employment and training; and from moving from CAMHS to adult mental health services. A clear roadmap would set out the process, timescales, sources of help and contacts for each stage of the journey. This is basic co-production practice.
40. I will make one further suggestion aimed at improving co-production, reducing frustration and alleviating some of the panic and despair that many parents and carers feel and express when they experience a poor service. This is to establish a multi-agency SEND Hub, to complement the work of SENDIASS.
41. The Hub could provide the point of contact operationally for anyone with a concern about SEND if they are unable to contact their own caseworker or their named contact. I heard many stories of parents not being to get through to a SEND service, sometimes for weeks or months. Parents and carers need and deserve to be answered and responded to at pace. I also suggest consideration that the commissioning service is closely aligned so that service-related questions can be responded to quickly. Front-loading responses would help to save time later as many problems I heard about became worse during the wait.
42. Another improvement in co-production is to an approach is to ensure that parents and carers do not have to repeat their story to more than one professional. This should be across the wider system as the 'Lead Professional' should be the best fit for the child and parent/carer. Local Offers for families in medium-sized towns across Suffolk like Beccles, Eye, Leiston, Newmarket and Haverhill, not just Ipswich, Bury St Edmunds and Lowestoft could also be explored. However, as I have said before, the Assistant Director and Head of SEND services have these and similar improvements in scope for the future. For now, they must get the basics right.

### Advisory Point

- *Suffolk County Council take the lead role to put in place a SEND MASH (multi-agency SEND Hub), so that any concern about SEND is answered on the day by SEND navigators who can ensure the right level of action is taken on the day.*
- *The purpose would be to prevent delay and deterioration in a situation, to build confidence in SEND services and to help parents and carers secure the action needed for their child or children.*

## THE VOICES OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

43. I will end with the voices of some children and their parents, just a few to make the point. I could have filled pages with such quotes. The service needs to find a better way in which to allow people to tell their stories and for their stories to be at the heart of SEND service provision in Suffolk. Here is a small selection.

*“Can I have a version of my EHCP I can stick on the fridge”*

*“I am her parent and I should be involved in all conversations about her.”*

*“I’m falling behind in work. I’ve not got a routine. I don’t have any friends like me. I want a school with people like me, one I can feel comfortable in so I can learn without having to worry”*

*“I share this raw account with you in the hope this will give some realisation to what parents are going through and hope that in some way this helps someone else.”*

## AND FINALLY, WHEN IT WORKS:

*‘I just wanted to let you know that I visited the school last Friday. I was pleasantly surprised by how open and honest Susie was about the issues they are sorting out and how much there is to do. I am looking forward to Abbie starting there in September as I believe that they will be able to give her the help and support she needs. I would like to take this opportunity to say thank you and to your team for arranging the placement for my daughter’.*

Anthony Douglas CBE  
December 2023