

# Strengthening Services for Children and Families in Suffolk Board Bulletin



Nicola Beach, Chair of the Board and Chief Executive of Suffolk County Council



Sarah-Jane Smedmor, Executive Director of Children and Young People's Services

The first meeting of the multi-agency Strengthening Services for Children and Families in Suffolk Board took place on 23 January 2025 and this is the first Board Bulletin that has been prepared. It is hoped that this is helpful and informative.

## **Purpose and frequency of the Board:**

As this was the first meeting, the purpose, terms of reference and governance arrangements were the first item on the agenda for discussion and agreement.

The Board has been established to strengthen the services provided by a range of partners for children and families in Suffolk. The Board will do this by:

- Agreeing shared priorities to improve and transform services
- Providing professional support and challenge to strengthen services, by achieving better outcomes for children and families, and better performance
- Delivering improvements and reforms, in line with agreed planning, milestones and target dates
- Unblocking barriers to accelerate improvements; and,
- Monitoring the progress and impact of improvement and reform activity

Membership of the Board was agreed and includes colleagues from Suffolk County Council, the NHS, Suffolk Safeguarding Partnership, Department for Education, Essex County Council (as a Sector Led Improvement Partner), Suffolk Constabulary and elected Cabinet members. A full list of members is listed at the bottom of this bulletin.

It was agreed that the Board will report progress to Suffolk County Council's Cabinet, with regular updates provided to key leaders, including the Leader of the Council, and relevant Executive Members. Regulatory and inspection bodies, including HMI Ofsted,

Care Quality Commission and HMI Probation will continue to monitor progress through relevant inspection frameworks. Board members will collaborate with other strategic groups and will operate as a delivery arm of the Suffolk Safeguarding Children's Partnership, ensuring two-way communication and feedback. The Board is committed to engaging frontline staff and managers, regularly testing the impact of improvements. The Board will also engage and consult with children, young people, and their parents and carers, to ascertain their views, wishes and feelings and co-produce solutions and next steps.

Subject to a few minor amendments it is anticipated that the terms of reference will be approved at the next Board meeting. Board meetings will take place every two months, with the next meeting planned for 20 March 2025.

### **Setting the Scene – Overview and Stocktake of CYP Change Activity**

The second item on the agenda was a discussion about the totality of transformation and improvement activity being undertaken across Children and Young People's Services.

Decisions included agreement about the nature and extent of change work, agreement about the reporting and governance structures, agreement about the forward plan with further discussions set to take place about proposed issues and suggestions for these to be taken forward.

### **Strategic updates about improvement and transformation priorities:**

Each Board meeting will feature progress updates about improvement priorities for Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and Children's Social Care Services. These will be reported in accordance with the agreed improvement plans and programmes of activity put in place following the outcome of the Joint Ofsted and CQC Area SEND inspection, completed in November 2023, and the Ofsted Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS), completed in June 2024. Plans for the local delivery of the 'Families First' transformation programme are being developed in

## **SEND Programme Update:**

### **The key highlights included:**

- Completion of the DfE stocktake, with positive feedback on current progress.
- Preparation of the draft Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA), scheduled for discussion at the Health and Wellbeing Board.
- Governance review completed, with proposals for improvements to be presented at the SEND Committee.
- Improved timeliness of Education, Health, and Care Plans (EHCPs).
- Data from Delivering Better Value (DBV) interventions showing positive outcomes across schools and children.

### **Challenges included:**

- The SEND quality assurance system requires further work to confirm a consistent framework and feedback mechanism.
- Governance structures require further development to provide sufficient strategic oversight.
- Communication with parents and carers needs strengthening to encourage engagement and promote certainty.

### **Next Steps:**

- Continue preparations for upcoming deep dives, including evidence collation and leadership briefing sessions.
- Map all projects and activities within SEND to create comprehensive delivery plans.
- Finalise Terms of Reference and governance structures to strengthen oversight.
- Develop and implement a SEND EHCP quality assurance framework.

- The development of a SEND outcomes scorecard with strategic partners and the Council for Disabled Children

### **Children's Social Care (ILACS) Improvement Action Plan Update**

The aim of this activity is to focus on the identified improvement priority actions to achieve and maintain a consistently 'Good' and better quality of practice to improve outcomes for children and young people in need of support, protection, and care in Suffolk. The Improvement Action Plan (IAP) seeks to address the seven Priority Improvement Areas (PIAs) which are as follows:

- The consistency in the application of thresholds in the MASH.
- The quality of assessment and support to children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless, including joint assessments with housing, the provision of emergency accommodation and ensuring that children are made aware of their right to be accommodated by the local authority.
- Timeliness of the application of pre-proceedings and proceedings to ensure that children do not experience delay in their permanence being secured.
- The quality and consistency of pathway planning with care leavers.
- Care leavers' understanding of their entitlements and the local care leaver offer.
- The assessment and accessibility of support for care leavers post-21.
- The comprehensiveness and accuracy of the local authority's understanding of the quality of practice for children, families, and care leavers.

### **Key highlights:**

- Ofsted confirmed that the Improvement Action Plan addresses inspection findings and sets realistic and meaningful targets following the Annual Engagement Meeting in December 2024.
- Improvements in the consistency of MASH thresholds were demonstrated through the Essex SLIP diagnostic, with positive feedback highlighting enhanced family engagement and better threshold application.

- A refreshed Liquid Logic pathway planning template for care leavers was introduced in December 2024, supported by additional training workshops for Personal Advisers (PAs) and ongoing quality assurance (QA) activities.
- November 2024 audit of homeless 16/17-year-olds confirmed accurate decision-making for all 19 cases, with 14 receiving assessments. Joint protocols with housing partners have been developed and partially implemented.
- Actions launched to improve care leavers' understanding of their entitlements, including:
  - A Care Leavers' Survey promoted through December communication.
  - Direct engagement initiatives starting in December 2024.
  - Integration of entitlement discussions into pathway plan reviews.
- Cultural changes introduced to improve post-21 support for care leavers, including maintaining contact through three annual touchpoints and rolling out an updated Local Offer for care leavers aged 21+.
- QA sampling conducted for care leavers in custody and unsuitable accommodation, with results due in January 2025. Early findings indicate mixed outcomes, informing further targeted action.
- Collaboration with SLIP partners (Essex, Norfolk, and Action for Children) is ongoing, with diagnostics scheduled in January 2025 to provide independent evaluations of progress

**Challenges included:**

- The Joint Housing Protocol remains unsigned by District and Borough Council, who are members of the Suffolk Housing Board, and needs to be addressed as soon as possible to support the collaborative practice with homeless 16/17-year-olds.
- Quality assurance resources need strengthening to achieve and maintain consistently good quality practice
- Evidencing care leavers' understanding of their entitlements or the impact of the Care Leaver's Local Offer.

- Additional staffing approved to support services requiring improvement and experiencing additional demands, namely in the MASH and Leaving Care Service, need to be recruited and in post as soon as possible.

#### **Next Steps:**

- Finalise the review of new pathway plans, care leavers in unsuitable accommodation, and 18+ care leavers. Report findings to Improvement, Quality and Performance Board in January and February 2025 to inform more targeted actions.
- Escalate the Joint Housing Protocol issue with the Suffolk Housing Board to ensure sign off by all District and Borough Council representatives.
- Further develop and prioritise ways to promote and measure the impact of young people's rights and entitlements discussions and embed this in reviews of new pathway plans
- Review and strengthen quality assurance capacity to support robust evaluation of progress and improvements across all priority improvement areas.
- Expedite the recruitment of additional MASH and Leaving Care staff to address additional demands and the need for improvement in these areas.
- Use findings from the Essex SLIP MASH diagnostics (26/27 November 2024) to refine and target further improvement activities
- Continue to prepare for future Essex SLIP diagnostics in the Leaving Care Service (4 days in January 2025).

#### **'Families First' Transformation Programme**

This transformation programme seeks to address the delivery of Suffolk's Families First Partnership Programme as part of the national reforms set out in the policy paper "Keeping Children Safe, Helping Families Thrive" (2024) and the emerging 'Children's Wellbeing and Schools' Bill (2024). The programme aims to transform children's social care by strengthening early intervention, enhancing child protection, and empowering family networks.

**Key highlights:**

- The strategic direction has been approved by the council's leadership
- The Programme Initiation Documents (PIDs) are being developed for all project workstreams to align with DfE expectations.
- The service is in the process of establishing engagement and co-design groups with staff and stakeholders to help shape and develop programme design and delivery.
- The service is on track in relation to the guidance that has been received from the DfE about expectations for Local Authorities, with further guidance due to follow in April 2025

**Key challenges:**

- There are some potential staff concerns about the scale and impact of proposed changes which are understandable and will require ongoing communication and support moving forward.
- There is some uncertainty around the DfE's minimum expectations, which creates some challenges when aligning local designs with national requirements, but these are being worked through.

**Next Steps:**

- Finalise the PIDs for all workstreams and establish monitoring frameworks to evaluate programme impact.
- Launch dedicated communication platforms to provide regular updates to staff and other key stakeholders.
- Engage with the pathfinder programmes and delivery partners to refine approaches and continue to learn from best practice.

## **Improvement, Quality and Performance Board**

The Improvement, Quality and Performance Board (IQP) has been refreshed to ensure the Children's Social Care priority improvement actions remain front and centre and that performance and quality assurance evidence and intelligence is used to support and challenge operational services.

### **Key highlights:**

- The new IQP Board is now in place with refreshed terms of reference, an Assistant Director now chairs and revised reporting expectations have been established with all Heads of Service/Senior Leads.
- The Quality Assurance Service review and redesign has been progressed with agreed next steps to strengthen and develop the overall offer and approach.
- A new interim Quality Assurance Development Lead has been appointed to support the QA redesign and interim arrangements to bolster QA activity and impact.
- SLIP Programme for MASH took place in December 2024 providing positive overall feedback with some recommendations for further improvements.

### **Key challenges:**

- The quality assurance offer needs to be strengthened and developed at pace and requires additional recruitment. Filling existing vacant posts remains a challenge and there are capacity and managerial pressures which require interim plans to resolve these pending permanent recruitment and longer-term arrangements in the longer term.
- The granularity of quality and performance oversight and operational focus requires further attention.
- A quality assurance exercise of 65 care experienced young people living in 'unsuitable accommodation' (published on 6 January 2025) did not provide sufficient assurance about the quality of practice and highlighted significant pressures in securing suitable accommodation. This exercise included evidence



of a disproportionate number of former-relevant unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people leaving care and living in emergency accommodation.

**Next Steps:**

- The Quality Assurance Service review and redesign has proposed to recruit a new Quality Assurance Head of Service and a dedicated Principal Social Worker. This is happening at pace now and additional arrangements being secured in the interim.
- To consult with the Children's Social Care Senior Management Team to address arrangements to assure the quality of practice and performance.
- To address the recommended actions from the QA exercise regarding care experienced young people in unsuitable accommodation in partnership with local housing authority partners.

The Board meeting was very well attended by multi-agency Board members. Thank you for your engagement and contribution, this is very much appreciated. The next meeting will be held on 20 March 2025 between 1:00 and 2:30pm in the CYP Room, Endeavour House. Please feel free to share this Bulletin.

Thank you,

**Nicola Beach**

**Chief Executive, Suffolk County Council**

**Full List of Members:**

Suffolk County Council, Chief Executive, Nicola Beach (Chair)

Suffolk County Council, Executive Director of Children and Young People's Services, Sarah-Jane Smedmor (Co-Chair)

Suffolk County Council, Lead Member and Cabinet Member for Children and Young People's Services, Councillor Bobby Bennett

Suffolk County Council, Cabinet Member for Education and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), Councillor Andrew Reid

Suffolk County Council, Executive Director of Adult Social Care, Gareth Everton

Suffolk County Council, Director of Public Health and Communities, Stuart Keeble

NHS Suffolk and North-East Essex Integrated Care Board, Director of Nursing, Lisa Nobes

NHS Norfolk and Waveney Integrated Care Board, Tracey Bleakley

Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils, Chief Executive, Arthur Charvonia

Department for Education, CSC Team Leader, Regional Improvement Group, East of England, James Allen-Perry

Suffolk Safeguarding Partnership, Independent Scrutineer, Chris Robson,

Essex County Council, Head of Children's Improvement Partnerships, Dave Barron

Suffolk Youth Justice Management Board, Chair, Assistant Chief Constable,

Eamonn Bridger

Suffolk County Council, Assistant Director (Children's Social Care, Corporate Parenting and Youth Justice), Codrutza Oros-Marsh

Suffolk County Council, Assistant Director (Family Support, MASH, Safeguarding, QEPD, Resources and Support), Allison Hassey

Suffolk County Council, Assistant Director for Health, Nursing and Midwifery, Community Services and Commissioning, Richard Cracknell

Suffolk County Council, Interim Assistant Director (Education, Skills, and Learning), Julia Grainger

Suffolk County Council, Interim Assistant Director (Inclusion), Helen Phelan

Suffolk County Council, Interim Assistant Director (Transformation and Improvement), Gail Hancock

Suffolk County Council, Programme Lead Families First, James Boxer

With prior permission from the Chair, and in exceptional circumstances, a suitable senior executive may deputise on behalf of their named representative.

The following Business Partners will also attend the Board, unless otherwise advised in advance:

Suffolk County Council, Head of Data and Intelligence, Harriet Wakeling

Suffolk County Council, HR Strategic Partner, Michael Howe

Suffolk County Council, Finance Strategic Partner, Sonya Harban

Suffolk County Council, Communications Strategic Partner, Kate Dodd