



Department
for Education

Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street

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

Dr Ed Garrett, Chief Executive, Suffolk and North East Essex Integrated Care Board

Tracey Bleakley, Chief Executive, Norfolk and Waveney Integrated Care Board

19 July 2024

Dear Sarah-Jane, Ed and Tracey,

Deep Dive into Area of Priority Action regarding Education, Health and Care Statutory Processes

Thank you for the Local Area Partnership's ("the partnership") attendance and participation at the deep dive review meeting with DfE and NHS England officials on 15 July 2024. Thank you in particular to Sarah-Jane for her engagement with the meeting and setting such a constructive tone. This meeting was to review the progress the partnership has made against the second area for priority action (APA) from the Ofsted inspection report. This APA is:

"Local area partnership leaders should cooperate to take urgent action to improve the timeliness and quality of the statutory Education and Health Care (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."

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; and
- d. Agree priority recommendations to focus on to make rapid progress against the APA.

In preparation for the meeting, fieldwork was carried out by Helen Chester with a range of practitioners and providers, supplemented by Louise Warren's meeting with a group of parents and carers. Their findings were presented to those invited to the meeting and is summarised in the attached annex along with detailed reflections on communications, lived experiences of the SEND system and partnership working.

The partnership acknowledged the important contributions that had been made and thanked the parents, carers and all those that facilitated the meeting for capturing a range of different voices and experiences.

Documentary evidence provided by the local authority on behalf of the partnership and during discussions report progress against the improvement actions are:

- Improvements in the 20-week timeliness for completion of EHC plans, rising from 3% in October 2023 to 18% at the end of May 2024. Further improvements are required but the data shows more plans are being completed within the statutory 20-weeks.
- Multiple check points established to produce better quality plans.
- Single agency audits in place.
- Improvements to the quality and timeliness of health advice, including an improved process for sign-off of final EHCPs when there is health provision required in Section G.
- New data dashboards to help track assessments and reviews for individual children and young people.
- Additional funding to enable the recruitment of new staff, including the creation of a co-production lead working across the partnership.

The key issues and recommendations are listed below.

- There is a consensus that relationships with some parents and families are still not working consistently well and too often are fundamentally broken. This is borne out by feedback from parents and carers, who gave many examples of traumatic experiences from engaging with the SEND system and is further supported by the feedback gathered from practitioners. Alongside this are examples of positive and improving relationships. The work to reset relationships with parents and carers therefore needs to continue, so that they feel heard and assured their feedback is acted on and there is greater recognition of the challenges vulnerable families face in navigating a very complicated system.
- Staff who contributed to the discussions said they do not know how to answer queries and are unclear about the structure of the system, the processes that underpin it and key messages that have been shared by leaders. Action is therefore needed so that practitioners across the system understand each other's roles more consistently and are empowered to act in the best interests of children so that the different parts of the system fit together effectively.

- Feedback loops are not working well enough and work is underway to improve them. Specific action is needed to address written communication of responses to complaints and integration of services needs to be actively role modelled, with learning from feedback and sharing of intelligence. Senior managers need to engage more directly with parents and carers, to hear first-hand their experiences of the SEND system and to engage them with improvements. Some practical steps are also needed; for example the annual review system needs to be more responsive to handling revisions and changes to plans. Practitioners reported that, currently, EHC plans have to be printed, changes made by hand, and then scanned back into the system.
- The quality of EHC plans is not improving as quickly as it should and more needs to be done to bring in the voices of families, children and young people. Whilst the LA has reported improvement from the quality assurance process, this has not been experienced sufficiently by those who fed back.
- Service managers need to be more adept at gathering and recording evidence of impact across the SEND system and communicating this to families. This applies to both the EHC planning and the annual review processes.
- There is a disconnect between the local authority and schools in terms of what can be delivered in different education settings and when it is appropriate to move between the different types of schools. The local authority should continue working in partnership with schools and academy trusts to drive improvements across the SEND system.
- Capacity across the SEND system is already fully stretched and so any improvement planning needs to be mindful of this in order to ensure action is taken effectively.
- Work is underway to demonstrate impact of the improvement work being undertaken. However, this was discussed during the session and further conversations are needed in this area. Helen Chester, SEND Adviser, and the partnership have agreed further work in this area to ensure this can be effectively demonstrated.

Recommendations

- Improvement Board to update their action plan to reflect the feedback in this letter, in terms of actions on communications, relationships and partnership working, as well as improvements to EHC planning, annual reviews and quality assurance processes.
- The Board must also ensure that processes are put in place to capture the impact of improvement actions and that they are having a positive impact on the lived experiences of children, young people and families in Suffolk.
- Leaders across the SEND system need to ensure ongoing learning from parent and carer experiences is captured, acted on and reported back to parents and carers, so that confidence is restored. System leaders need to proactively seek the voice of children and young people.

- It was agreed that DfE will arrange a feedback meeting with the PCF early in the autumn term with parents and carers who participated in the meeting with Louise Warren and local area partners. This will be a 'you said, we did' session and will seek their feedback on next steps.
- DfE to work with Suffolk CC on escalation routes for academy trusts not meeting obligations for EHC plans.

Next steps

DfE and NHS England officials will hold a stocktake meeting in early November with the partnership to assess progress against the improvement plan and areas of priority action. That will be an opportunity to explore how the findings from this deep dive are being acted on. We know that improvements, and the impact of these on children and young people, will take time to embed but continued partnership working to drive forward these improvements is highly recommended.

I again thank all parties for their participation and input into the initial evidence gathering and the deep dive review meeting.



Jonathan Fairclough

Head of Delivery for Suffolk & Cambridgeshire

CC: Ros Somerville, Assistant Director Inclusion
Claire Smith, Suffolk Parent Carer Forum
Sue Wilgoss, Suffolk Parent Carer Forum

Annex

Discussion regarding fieldwork carried out by Helen Chester and Louise Warren

| Areas of discussion | Responses | Actions |
|--|---|--|
| <p><u>Feedback from parents</u></p> <p>Frequent emotions reported from the engagement with families were sadness, hopelessness and anger</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Some key quotes from parent and carer feedback were : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ So let down ○ Shocking plans being written post inspection. ○ Timeliness has improved; however, quality has gone down. ○ No transition from child to adult services ○ No voice is heard, or provision is given. ○ My child wasn't autistic enough for an EHCP ○ Potential to go drastically wrong. ○ Monstrous game of musical chairs ○ At no point has anyone done something ○ Devastatingly appalling treatment. ○ Merry go round of relentlessness. ○ We are losing our children's childhood. ○ There is no compassion, I have given up hope. <p>Key points from the discussion were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Lack of communication, struggle to contact appropriate staff and feel they are referred to different contacts without results | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Communication must be seen as the overarching element to drawing together the partnership, to developing a cohesive system and to changing the lived experiences of children, young people and their families. The improvement actions underway will not have the intended impact without good communications at all levels. ● Consider how complaints are responded to and explore how a more personalised, compassionate approach may benefit relationships between the LA and families. ● Local area partners must work cohesively together to ensure that the actions they undertake lead to systemic change and have a direct impact on the lived experiences of children, young people and families. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The partnership is due to receive some support from Council for Disabled Children to improve co-production |

| Areas of discussion | Responses | Actions |
|--|--|---|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Families feel that they get generic responses to complaints; they feel unheard and ignored ○ Parental mental health is suffering as the process is causing anxiety, trauma and continued stress ○ Parents and carers struggle to get initial assessment and then feel like review processes are not child centred, robust or of high quality ○ Uncertainty and lack of clarity in the process which leads to a lack of confidence and unmet needs of the children and young people. – eg many staff are unclear on triage criteria for EP assessments and the use of remote EP assessments ○ More ongoing sessions where parents/carers can share their experiences ie carry on with Time to Listen and go further | |
| <p>Heard from a broad range of practitioners and providers and themes seemed to triangulate with what the parents and carers were saying</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Communication internally and externally is not as clear as it would like – the different parts of the system do not know how they fit together ○ Staff feel like they do not know how to answer queries, except for generic responses and they feel unclear about the structure of the system and processes that underpin it ○ Practitioners are not always sure of the strategic plans that are happening, how that impacts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ongoing engagement with practitioners to check understanding. Development of guides and training on who is responsible for what and to empower practitioners that they can make referrals ie clarity on Section 23 notifications ● Analyse where Section 23 notifications are coming from to know if there are other professions that we need to target with |

| Areas of discussion | Responses | Actions |
|---------------------|---|---|
| | <p>them and what it means they should do - know messages are being fed down but there is a disconnect with partners and how this is manifesting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Disconnect with the local authority (LA) and schools and the different types of schools ie what an AP / special school can deliver and when it is appropriate to move between the different types of schools ○ Communication is not there between health and LA. The LA has had a £4m increase in funding but the impact on the health system had not been fully explored. There is no shared understanding between the local area partnership (LAP) and the demand on the system ○ Annual review process - Systems do not seem effective. Not all individual practitioners that need to be involved have access to portals etc leading to printing off sheets and manually making recommendations rather than completing the process online. ○ Confusion on roles and responsibilities regarding referrals, particularly in early years | <p>guidance and support as it is everyone's business</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Strengthening feedback loops and providing live feedback in a systematic, strategic and consistent manner ● Commitment to regular involvement of LAP executives with PCF ie forums ● Ensuring staff wellbeing so they can provide the level of support they wish to ● Ensure recruitment and induction processes build in expectations for delivery and ensure the necessary skillsets are developed. |

| Areas of discussion | Responses | Actions |
|----------------------------------|--|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ System is at maximum capacity and therefore the quality of the provision isn't where it should be and affects the QA process | |
| Feedback on coproduction | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Health and LA / education providers are not working collaboratively – this may link to the lack capacity practitioners have to be able to come together in a shared space. ○ Under-representation of schools/providers in strategic meetings and planning – it was not clear that education providers are fully invested in supporting the local area ○ SENDCOs not being clear on processes and parents have lack of confidence in school system ○ Insufficient school places to meet the demand for school specialist placements. What more can be done with education providers to bring children back to their local community and schools? How can you bring education providers into this conversation? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Work closely with schools and education providers to work together – Suffolk Education Partnership to continue its work ● DfE hold funding agreement (FA) with academies; action here is for DfE and the LA to be working closely together and ensure breaches of the FA are tackled promptly. ● Partnership working - now have representation from each phase of educational sector and meet regularly and now have an agreed way in to the system and how they will support LAP to get into the frontline which is a massive improvement from before |
| Quality Assurance (QA) Processes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Key points: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ There is inconsistency in the QA process and in how findings are fed back | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Overhaul of QA process – SCC is taking proposals to committee to decide how to consistently feed into all of the system and show what is changing, what the impact is, |

| Areas of discussion | Responses | Actions |
|---------------------|---|---|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ There is a lack of capacity to action improvements ○ Overall quality of plans has dipped, with not all plans having SMART outcomes and provision | <p>how that affects someone's role and what action can then be taken</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Provide practitioners with best practices and clear evidence of what makes a 'SMART' plan ○ Increasing capacity in those producing plans ○ Ensure that families are part of the QA process consistently ○ Enable schools to recognise that they can make recommendations around Sec B - this can be done as part of the annual review training that is being rolled out |