

## **Independent Chair's Update on SEND Improvement Board Meeting**

**16 April 2026**

Representatives from the SEND Improvement Board attended the latest meeting on 16 April.

### **What is the purpose of the Board?**

The purpose of the Board is to provide strategic oversight and to hold those with responsibility to account for improving special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) services across Suffolk. Senior leaders recognise that children and families are entitled to a better experience and are committed to delivering the improvements needed.

The SEND Local Area Partnership comprises Suffolk County Council, NHS Suffolk and North East Essex Integrated Care Board (ICB), NHS Norfolk and Waveney Integrated Care Board (ICB), Suffolk Parent Carer Forum, schools and settings, colleges, health providers and the voluntary sector.

### **Chair's reflections**

SEND services in Suffolk are steadily improving which is a bold statement to make, however, there is now evidence to prove it.

Month on month the data shows positive growth and improving numbers.

It is possible to see that the number of Education, Health and Care Plans being issued within 20 weeks is well above the national average and growing. In March 2026, 80% of EHCPs were issued within 20 weeks where the national average is 46.4%.

Of course, we all know that data can be interpreted and presented in different ways to suit the audience. However, the data is readily available for scrutiny. The way we collect and present the data has also been strengthened considerably to help understand services, and the impact that improvements are having.

Leaders know that there is some way to go still to ensure that positive change is felt by all families in Suffolk, and are sorry when services don't always get things right. However, we now know through robust data that improvements are on the right track and that continuing to improve services will continue. Where progress has been slower or challenges remain, plans are in place to address these issues.

As I write this, the outcome of an Ofsted monitoring visit is awaited which was carried out in March. Whilst this feedback remains pre-publication, it is possible to say that inspectors recognised how well the system knew themselves. The outcome of the visit will be helpful to the ongoing improvement journey. The letter will be shared publicly in the next few weeks.

I hope this board report provides reassurance regarding the scale and breadth of improvements and reform underway.

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### **Summary of discussions at the January Board meeting**

#### **You Said. We Did**

This is a standing item on the SEND Improvement Board. It is crucial that the partnership listens to and acts on the views of parents and families. Some of the feedback and resulting actions are outlined below.

**You Said:** Annual reviews are not always being completed in line with statutory timescales. There is sometimes a lack of communication and insufficient notice ahead of meetings, including not receiving annual review paperwork at least two weeks in advance.

**We Did:** We have launched a system-wide project to review how annual reviews are planned, delivered and communicated across Suffolk. This work is focusing on statutory timescales, consistency of practice, communication with families, and the quality of person-centred planning, working closely with schools, settings and partners to identify areas for improvement. As part of this project, the partnership will implement system changes identified through the review, including embedding clearer expectations and improved ways of working across schools and settings. Impact will be monitored and reviewed alongside project life cycle.

**You Said:** There have been difficulties with tribunal deadlines being missed.

**We Did:** We recognised that tribunal deadlines have been challenging, particularly during a period of significantly increased demand. In response, we have stabilised and strengthened the SEND Tribunals service, including clearer management oversight, improved case tracking and regular triage meetings to resolve cases earlier where possible. We are also improving communication with families while they wait, including developing a clearer 'Way Forward' approach and working more closely with partners to reduce avoidable delays and support children and young people during the tribunal process.

**You Said:** Families waiting on the neurodevelopmental pathway have expressed concern about a lack of communication, leading to anxiety that referrals may have been lost. There also remains ongoing confusion for over-18s regarding right to choose and shared care agreements.

**We Did:** There is now in place a consistent and regular data set showing how many children and young people are waiting for assessment in current NHS commissioned arrangements. The under 11s waiting time for ND pathways in WSFT has reduced.

**You Said:** Schools have been named on EHCPs that are unable to meet need

**We Did:** We are working closely with schools and settings from early years through to further education to strengthen their ability to meet SEND needs earlier and more consistently. This includes refreshing the early years graduated response to align with schools, improving speech and language screening through the WellComm tool, and providing targeted SEND Education Support to build confidence in delivering support and Section F provision. There is further work to do in this area to ensure schools are supported to confidently meet children's needs.

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## **Performance & Data - Neurodevelopmental Pathways, Mental Health and SEND Scorecard**

The board discussed data on neurodevelopmental pathways, mental health and the SEND scorecard.

One of the many pieces of data presented to the board, was the length of wait for assessment and treatment. For example, at the James Paget University Hospital, an NHS commissioned service for neurodevelopmental assessments, there are approximately 4,202 children and young people waiting for treatment, with the average wait being 132 weeks. It was right that concern was raised by the board about the length of this wait. A recovery plan has been

launched by the hospital which aims to reduce all waits over 52 weeks and includes doubling its establishment to increase overall capacity and the number of children and young people they assess. The team has recently implemented a comprehensive pathway redesign, resulting in a smoother and more efficient patient journey. In collaboration with the integrated care board, a health inequalities initiative has been approved to fund additional capacity to assess young people aged 16 to 18 who currently face the longest waiting times.

Discussions also covered the fact that there are plans to move to a single provider model across Suffolk from January 2027 and the importance of support and communication for families while they wait. One of the actions agreed following this discussion was to review the neurodevelopmental waiting time data for Suffolk against regional and national comparators and provide reassurance to the board.

As a standing agenda item, the SEND scorecard was also presented to the board. This involves sets of data that show trends within SEND performance. Of note is the percentage of Education, Health and Care plans issued within the statutory guidelines of 20 weeks. It is pleasing to be able to report that this trend shows huge improvement. In March 2026, 80% of EHCPs were issued within 20 weeks. This is an improvement from February when 55.8% plans were issued and shows a significant leap from March 2025 when only 5% of plans were sent. Year to date that figure is 57.1%.

This indicator, in particular, shows the green shoots of improvement finally being felt and evidenced across the SEND system in Suffolk.

Further work is ongoing around annual reviews. The target for carrying out annual reviews each year is 75%. This was met in October, November and December last year, but has seen a slight dip this year. Work continues to improve this situation.

Actions agreed following discussions on the scorecard included the need to clarify scope, milestones and timelines for a fully integrated partnership scorecard, including health data, preparing for adulthood metrics and multi-agency quality assurance analysis.

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## **SEN2 Data**

The Board was also presented with high level data from Suffolk's SEN2 2026 statutory return, and the opportunity to compare this with the 2025 return. This gives is a clear, evidence-based understanding of demand and need across the SEND system and enables transparent benchmarking and targeted action.

Key highlights from the report include:

- Sustained growth in the SEND cohort: Suffolk recorded an 18% increase in the cohort (numbers of Education Health Care Plans/ Education Health Care Needs Assessments) compared to the previous year, reflecting continued growth in demand across the 0–25 age range and reinforcing the importance of system-wide capacity planning
- Significant increase in EHCPs finalised: 3,250 EHCPs were issued in 2025, representing over a 60% increase on the previous year, demonstrating the impact of recovery activity and concerted efforts to reduce the backlog

- Reduction in new assessment requests: the number of new EHCNA requests reduced slightly (6.3%) which may indicate earlier intervention, improved SEND support outside of the statutory processes, or stabilisation following previous years of sharp growth
- High level of system activity and resolution: Suffolk completed a significantly higher number of assessments and ceased plans than in previous years, showing active case management and improved flow through the statutory system, particularly for post 16 and post 19 young people

Following the publication of SEN2 2026 data for all local authorities, a comparison report will be written comparing Suffolk's performance with its statistical nearest neighbours. This will be presented to the board.

The board agreed the importance of this continued comparative analysis and its alignment with the SEND reform workstreams.

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### **ASEND Inspection Update**

Ofsted and CQC visited Suffolk in April for a monitoring visit. The official feedback is expected in May. However, discussions with inspectors evidenced how much better the partnership understands itself and were positive about the partnership's openness, self-awareness and honesty. The letter will be published in due course, and a communications plan will be agreed by the board.

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### **LAIP Update**

Again, another useful standing item for the board is an update on the progress of the SEND Local Area Inclusion Plan (LAIP). The LAIP sets out strategic priorities and actions across the Local Area Partnership to support further system level change and improvements in Suffolk.

It has been developed with the full range of stakeholders across Suffolk, and it is strongly believed that the focus on coproduction will enable the partnership to deliver on its joint ambitions. The plan sets out high aspirations and aims to narrow the achievement gap by ensuring the right support is provided at the right time. It prioritises early intervention and reflects a needs-based approach to supporting children and young people with SEND.

We will review the Plan and its associated actions regularly to ensure the focus remains on the right priorities, and outcomes for children and young people with SEND across Suffolk continue to improve..

There has been a lot of work ongoing in this area. Between January and April, 10% of all actions are now green (compared to 4.2% in January) and 68% of actions are on track.

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### **SEND Governance Update**

The board were given a verbal update on the SEND Governance workstream. It was noted that the Intervention Support Fund has enabled a full review of SEND governance arrangements, resulting in a strengthened governance system. This includes clearer routes for escalation, improved delegation of actions, streamlined agenda setting, and enhanced clarity of roles and

alignment between the SEND Operational Group, Data and Performance mechanisms, and the SEND Improvement Board. It was agreed that the governance pack will come back to the board for formal approval.

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I hope this update is helpful.

The next Board meeting will take place on Thursday 21 May.

Thanks,

**Kathryn Boulton**

Independent Chair of the SEND Improvement Board