

Strengthening Services for Children and Families in Suffolk Board Bulletin

Re: Board Meeting September 18th 2025

Compiled by the Chairman of the Board, Nicola Beach, Chief Executive of Suffolk County Council

Purpose and frequency of the Board:

The Board has been established to strengthen the improvement and transformation of 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, reform milestones and target dates
- Unblocking barriers to accelerate improvements, and
- Monitoring the progress of improvement and reform

Board members include colleagues from the NHS, Suffolk County Council, Suffolk Safeguarding Partnership, Department for Education, Essex County Council, Suffolk Constabulary and Cabinet members. A full list of members is listed at the end of this bulletin.

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. HMI Ofsted, Care Quality Commission and HMI Probation, will continue to monitor progress through their respective regulatory inspection frameworks.

Members of this Board 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.

We are also committed to engaging frontline staff and managers, regularly testing the impact of improvements. We will also seek feedback from children, young people, and their parents and carers, through various stakeholders.

Meetings take place every two months, with the next meeting planned for December 9th.

Children's social care improvement:

There has been a lot of work to drive improvement within children's social care following the ILACS inspection in August 2024.

Governance and Oversight

The Internal Improvement, Quality and Performance Board, chaired by the Service Director, has been re-scoped to provide oversight across all areas of the social care and family support system. The revised focus aims to strengthen governance, identify priority areas, and drive continuous improvement across the service.

Service-Led Improvement Programme (SLIP) – Phase 2

Phase 2 of the SLIP Activity in partnership with Essex Council has been completed. This phase included 15 team-level diagnostics covering fieldwork, disabled children and young people and Children in Care services. Workshops are scheduled to commence in September 2025 to build on findings and support implementation of improvement actions.

IMPOWER “Valuing Care” Project

The IMPOWER Valuing Care initiative is currently underway and includes a comprehensive review of panel processes. New procedures have been introduced to strengthen decision-making around accommodation agreements and to enhance oversight of the residential estate.

Ofsted Activity

- **ILACS Focus Visit Notification:**
Ofsted has confirmed an upcoming ILACS Focus Visit to review front door arrangements. The visit will examine:
 - Contacts, referrals, and thresholds
 - Timeliness and decision-making
 - Step-up / step-down processes
 - Onward signposting
 - Performance management and management oversight
 - Supervision and quality assurance
 - Workforce continuous professional development

Sufficiency Planning

A Sufficiency Board has been established to oversee and support the newly formed Operational Sufficiency Group. The board will hold its first meeting in October, focusing on strategic oversight of placement sufficiency across the county.

Quality Assurance and Practice Improvement

The Quality Assurance Framework is being expanded to include increased dip-sampling activity, ensuring greater scrutiny of casework quality.

The moderation process has also been revised to ensure greater consistency and transparency in decision-making and performance evaluation.

Workforce and Service Design

A new service structure and way of working is being introduced across the system, aligned with the Families First Programme and will begin in November. This approach aims to:

- Enable earlier intervention and support for families
- Maintain consistently low caseloads across the county
- Support practitioners to deliver high-quality, reflective practice

This work has resulted in a number of improvements being seen.

This improvement includes:

- Caseloads are showing signs of improvement across several areas of the service, reflecting ongoing work to stabilise workloads and strengthen capacity. To support this, additional recruitment has been undertaken within the Front Door service, increasing staffing levels to manage the continued rise in contact volumes.
 - The number of children and young people participating in their Children in Care Reviews has increased, reflecting stronger engagement and improved facilitation of the review process by Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and social work teams.
 - Performance in relation to care leavers continues to improve: understanding of entitlements among care leavers has increased; completion of pathway plans is at 97%, demonstrating improved planning and oversight; Post-21 support access has risen, with more young adults continuing to engage with services; and the number of care leavers in unsuitable accommodation has decreased to 62, reflecting improved housing support and partnership working.
 - The fostering service continues to strengthen, with a record number of kinship placements now in place. Several new initiatives have been introduced to support and celebrate kinship carers, including kinship support groups and summer events.
 - Performance in early years health visiting remains strong: new birth visits are close to target at 87%; by 21 days, 96.9% of babies have received a new birth visit; and 6–8 week reviews are performing above target at 92%.
These figures indicate consistent delivery of early support and positive engagement with families.
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SEND Improvement:

The board also had a progress update on work within Special Education Needs and Disabilities services. Improving how we deliver SEND provision is a key priority for the council and this board is integral in keeping an oversight on reform.

A number of Autumn term priorities for education, SEND and inclusion services were discussed. These priorities are designed to strengthen oversight of children's education participation, improve inter-service collaboration, and ensure that statutory responsibilities are consistently met.

A primary focus this term is to ensure that all Children Not in School or Education (CNIS) are fully known to the local authority and that statutory processes are applied appropriately. Work is underway to enhance identification, tracking, and support for this vulnerable cohort.

The service is progressing work to create a single CNIS data set across all Education service areas. This unified data set will ensure consistent visibility of CNIS cases to all practitioners, supporting earlier intervention, improved coordination, and more effective targeting of resources.

Policies and protocols are being refreshed and developed to ensure that all education settings promptly notify the local authority of children and young people who experience the following circumstances:

- Persistent or severe absence
- A part-time timetable
- Exclusion from school
- Use of alternative provision (both registered and unregistered)
- A move to or return from Elective Home Education (EHE)
- Authorised or unauthorised absence

This work will ensure a consistent approach to monitoring attendance and engagement across all education providers.

A review of local authority internal teams and pathways for children is being undertaken, informed by feedback from a schools survey. This review will identify areas for improvement in communication, case management, and service delivery.

Additionally, work is taking place to map future pathways both within and beyond local authority structures, ensuring clarity of roles, responsibilities, and partnership arrangements in supporting children and young people with additional needs.

School Attainment & Education Performance Outcomes 2025

Overview

The 2025 results across all key stages demonstrate areas of stability alongside continued challenges in closing the gap to national averages. While performance in Early Years and Key Stage 1 phonics remains in line with national outcomes, attainment at Key Stages 2, 4, and 5 continues to show variation, with widening gaps in several key measures.

Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)

In 2025, 68% of children achieved a good level of development. This performance remains in line with the national average, consistent with 2024, and represents a sustained improvement from 2023, when Suffolk was 1% below national.

Key Stage 1 – Phonics Screening

The proportion of pupils achieving the expected standard in phonics remains strong at 80%, again in line with the national figure and unchanged from 2024. This marks an improvement from 2023, when Suffolk was 2% below national.

Key Stage 2 – Combined Reading, Writing and Maths (RWM)

At Key Stage 2, 58% of pupils achieved the expected standard in combined Reading, Writing, and Maths (RWM). The gap to national performance widened in 2025 to -4%, compared with -3% in 2024, which had previously reflected a narrowing of the gap.

Key Stage 4 – GCSE Outcomes

Early data for 2025 indicates that Suffolk's performance is below national in the following areas:

- English Literature (grades 9–4 and 9–5)
- Mathematics (grades 9–4 and 9–5)

The gap to national has widened in 2025 for all of these measures except English Literature (9–5), where performance was maintained.

The proportion of pupils achieving grade 5+ in both English and Maths combined remains 6% below national, consistent with 2023 and 2024.

Key Stage 5 – Post-16 Outcomes

At Key Stage 5, current data shows that Suffolk remains below national averages across all main attainment measures ($A-A^*$, $A-C^*$, and $A-E^*$):

- The gap widened for $A-A^*$ and $A-C^*$ outcomes.
- The $A-E^*$ measure remained static compared with 2024.

Variation Across Schools

Across all key stages, there is considerable variation in school-level performance. Within the overall mean, some schools—across a range of contexts—continue to achieve consistently high outcomes, while others remain below national averages. This highlights both the strengths within the system and the need for continued focus on targeted support and school improvement.

A sector wide response has been mobilised to harness capacity, use strengths and bring about change across Suffolk schools and settings to close the gap with the national figures at KS2, KS4 and KS5.

This work includes using provision data to inform conversations with Headteachers, Governors and CEOs of MATs about the performance of children in their schools and settings and what response and support is needed, and work with the Suffolk Education Partnership to focus on how it will further contribute to sector wide improvement in attainment.

Families First Pilot Update

Next on the agenda was an update on the Families First Pilot. The scope of the pilot is to create an enhance Family Help structure that brings together existing Family Support and Social Care Field work Teams. It includes trialing the use of a single assessment and plan that brings together the best of existing assessments, plus some new or enhanced roles to support quality assurance, court-work, domestic abuse and children with disabilities. This includes the introduction of the Lead Child Protection Practitioner role in line with central government expectations. The pilot is due to go live in November 2025.

Quality Assurance

Ensuring quality assurance within children's services is very important, and the Board received an important update about work in this area.

Since May 2025 a new quality assurance framework has progressed and we have started new monthly manager audits. A new head of quality assurance has also joined the council and we have initiated a 'mocksted' focus visit of the Front Door.

The next meeting will be held on December 9th.

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, Interim Head of Programmes, 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