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Dr Ed Garratt, Clinical Commissioning Group Accountable Officer, Ipswich and East Suffolk, and West Suffolk

Ms Melanie Craig, Clinical Commissioning Group Accountable Officer, Great Yarmouth and Waveney

Ms Judith Mobbs, Local Area Nominated Officer, Suffolk County Council

Dear Ms Cook, Dr Garrett and Ms Craig

### **Ofsted and CQC visit to Suffolk local area**

Following the Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) joint visit to Suffolk, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills and the Chief Inspector of Primary Medical Services and Integrated Care of the CQC to summarise the visit findings. Thank you for the time you made available to discuss the impact of the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic on children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND).

Ofsted carried out this visit under a section 118(2) request from the Department for Education. CQC provided assistance to Ofsted under paragraph 9(1) of schedule 4 to the Health and Social Care Act 2008. The visit was not an inspection and local areas are not required to publish or share this letter. This visit was carried out as part of a series, the findings of which will be aggregated into three national reports to support whole-system learning. The national reports will be published on Ofsted's and CQC's websites.

Thank you for contributing valuable information. During the visit, we spoke to local area leaders, children and young people with SEND who were chosen to be part of case studies, their families, and the education, health and care professionals who work with them. We also surveyed parents and carers, as well as children and young people with SEND over the age of 16 years.

## Context

The purpose of this series of visits is to support local areas to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and young people with SEND and their families, learn from what has happened and identify opportunities for improvement.

You can find more information about how inspectors carried out the visit at: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/interim-phase-area-send>

Inspectors were told that:

- Area leaders decided early on in the pandemic to maintain services for children and young people with SEND, because ‘if you stop something, you have to start it again, and this can be difficult to manage’. The ways that services were provided changed, but no service was discontinued. Alongside maintaining services, leaders committed to continuing long-term strategic developments, such as the neuro-developmental pathway and the transformation work.
- The groundwork for greater collaboration and co-production undertaken before the pandemic has been built upon. The principles of transparency, flexibility to do things differently and quickly, and feedback loops have helped leaders respond to challenges as they arise.
- The pandemic has placed a lot of emotional stress on children, young people, families and professionals. The impact is described as relentless and overwhelming. The continuing uncertainty has created instability and anxiety. For some children and young people, the loss of routines has led to a deterioration in mental health and behaviour. Some are afraid to go back to school and reluctant to leave their house.
- Area leaders proactively provide support for staff welfare. Staying in touch with managers and updating risk assessments are supporting professionals to feel confident to do more face-to-face work with children, young people and their families.
- The demand from families for support is high and, early on in the pandemic, area leaders established additional routes for parents and carers to seek help. A dedicated email address was set up and was publicised on the local offer, alongside reminders about other sources of help and support.
- The emotional well-being hub, the youth engagement hub, the Suffolk Parent and Carer Network (SPCN) and the special educational needs independent advisory support service (SENDIASS) have worked together to point families to professional and voluntary services that can offer support.
  - The SPCN made and distributed family support boxes to over 2,000 families, provided advice packs and coordinated peer-to-peer support.
  - The ‘5 tips for families’ and the ‘back to school campaign’, co-produced by the SPCN, and the psychology and therapeutic services, reached over 3,000 people.

- The new Back to School Campaign, Parent Carer Helpline and webinars, such as the EHC Needs Assessment Webinar, which reached over 200 people, were co-produced and delivered with the SPCN and the SENDIASS.
- Locality virtual schools were set up across Suffolk to help remote multi-agency working for vulnerable children. Education welfare workers became caseworkers and reached many families. This supported children and young people's return to school.
- Leaders across education, health and care acknowledge that services are not providing the support needed for some children, young people and families.
  - Assessment and diagnosis for autism spectrum disorder have been delayed due to school closures and the waiting times have increased.
  - Referrals and provision within the child and adolescent mental health service are delayed.
  - Some children and young people are not getting the full offer of services for their education, health and care. There is a risk that this will lead to a rise in exclusions and part-time timetables. There has been an increase in applications from parents and carers to educate their children at home. Access to short breaks and mental health support has reduced, although this has been mitigated by the introduction of new services such as First Response and Kooth.
  - Young people aged 16 to 25 years have had their options for employment, training and independence reduced, including fewer apprenticeships.
- Access to remote learning has been a challenge for many children and young people with SEND and their families. The lack of resources, contact, and support has left many feeling frustrated.
- Multi-agency professionals and families have embraced new ways of staying in touch by phone, online and text messages. Frequent contact has enabled a range of services to work together to make decisions and act swiftly.
- Area leaders are keen to know about, and learn from, the lived experiences of children, young people and their families during the pandemic. The most recent survey by the SPCN gives a mixed picture. The information is being used to consider how best to provide further support, particularly in working out how to provide a full offer of services across education, health and care.

Leaders told inspectors that their emerging priorities for supporting children and young people with SEND include the following:

- Supporting families and providers to enable all children and young people to receive a full, coordinated and timely education, health, and care offer over the coming year, as area leaders navigate the continued uncertainties and challenges of the pandemic and winter pressures.
- Providing a responsive mental health and well-being offer in education settings and specialist services that can support the current and changing mental health needs of children and young people.

- Offering the right support at the right time to minimise the economic pressures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic on families and reduce its wider impact on young people's transition into employment and preparation for adulthood.

Ofsted and CQC will not publish this letter and will keep it confidential as far as possible. This letter will be shared with Department for Education SEND advisers and NHS England SEND advisers. These advisers may then choose to offer further support to the local area based on the findings.

Yours sincerely

Heather Yaxley  
**Her Majesty's Inspector, Ofsted**

Julie Knight  
**Her Majesty's Inspector, Ofsted**

Dan Carrick  
**Children's Services Inspector, CQC**