



East of England

All Party Parliamentary Group

Co-Chairs: Jess Asato MP & Pam Cox MP

Vice-Chairs: Blake Stephenson MP & Marie Goldman MP

OFSTED INSPECTION REFORMS AND OTHER EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS IN EAST OF ENGLAND

Background Briefing for Parliamentarians for Meeting from 13:00 to 14:00, Monday January 26th

This briefing contains background information on:

1. The remit of the Regional Director, East of England, Department for Education
2. The renewed Ofsted education inspections
3. Challenges facing local council education services in the East of England
4. Early Years provision in the East of England

Please note following the meeting a letter will be sent to the relevant Minister(s) at the Department for Education

1. The remit of the Regional Director, East of England, Department for Education

The DfE Regional director – Jonathan Duff - works locally across children's social care, SEND, schools and area-based programmes to improve outcomes for children, families and learners. His main responsibilities include:

- addressing underperformance in schools, academies, children's social care and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) services, offering support, and where necessary intervening, to deliver rapid improvement
- taking decisions on academy sponsor matches and significant changes to academies
- deciding on new free schools
- taking decisions on the creation, consolidation and growth of multi-academy trusts (MATs)
- supporting local authorities to ensure that every local area has sufficient places for pupils
- delivering across a number of key programmes by building the department's presence locally through working closely with stakeholders, local authorities, MATs, Ofsted, and other local government departments
- making sure local needs inform policy development
- leading the response to area wide special educational needs (SEN) inspections, ensuring effective challenge and support to enable areas of weakness to be remedied quickly
- taking the lead on ensuring there is an appropriate response to safeguarding cases arising in academies in their region, working closely with local authorities and Ofsted
- promoting financial health in the academy trusts and free schools sectors
- leading on ensuring strong governance in academy trusts – this does not include financial governance issues as they are overseen by the ESFA
- delivering across a number of key programmes emerging from the schools white paper, the SEND and AP green paper, and from the care review
- deciding on changes to admission arrangements where the Secretary of State has agreed a limited derogation to support fair access
- deciding on applications for an exemption from providing a "broadly Christian" daily act of collective worship, which can be replaced with collective worship that reflects the faith background of the academy's pupils and the population the academy serves

2. Renewed Education Inspections (information from Ofsted East)

Roll-out of education inspections

- From **10 November 2025** for early years, state-funded schools and further education and skills inspections.
- From **January 2026** for non-association independent schools and initial teacher education inspections.

Key changes to education inspections

- **New report card**, which will provide more nuance for parents and providers, combining at-a-glance grades with narrative summaries of strengths and areas for improvement.
- **A new five-point grading scale**, to set high expectations while encouraging improvement where it is needed. In response to feedback, the final set of grades have been renamed 'urgent improvement', 'needs attention', 'expected standard', 'strong standard' and 'exceptional'. The new exceptional grade will identify the very best provision in the country.
- **A renewed focus on inclusion**, through a new 'inclusion' evaluation area and inclusion woven throughout all other evaluation areas. Inspectors will evaluate whether education providers are providing high-quality support and addressing barriers to learning for all children and learners, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, and those who are known to children's social care.
- **New toolkits for each remit**, to show providers and inspectors the evaluation areas that we will focus on and how we will assess and grade providers. Toolkits are not a checklist; they will be used to guide conversations.
- **New operating guides for each remit**, to describe how the revised methodology will change the look and feel of inspection. The operating guides also set out how leaders and inspectors will reflect on a provider's context and priorities.
- **Taking steps to reduce provider workload**, as our toolkits are based on the professional standards and statutory and non-statutory requirements already placed on leaders and their provision. There is no expectation for providers to do anything different or additional for Ofsted that isn't already part of their usual day-to-day business.

3. Challenges Facing Local Council Education Services in the East of England (from LGE)

A) Increasing Demand for SEND Services

There is growing pressure on local councils due to ongoing demand for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) support. Rural areas and changing demographics, along with historic gaps in specialist and inclusive provision, mean more children are placed outside their local area. This increases transport costs and makes access harder for families. High numbers of requests for Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), appeals, and alternative education options have led to substantial funding deficits.

B) Shortage of Specialist Staff

Key roles such as educational psychologists, therapists, and specialist teachers remain difficult to fill. As a result, children often wait a long time for assessments and support, such as for Autism, ADHD, or speech needs, leaving many without the help they require at school.

C) School Sustainability and Rural Challenges

It is becoming harder to keep schools open, especially in rural areas affected by population shifts. Fewer pupils mean limited subject choices and stretched leadership resources. Reorganising schools adds further pressure. Councils must manage different governance models and adapt to local government changes, aiming for a sustainable education system. Councils currently lack powers over academy admissions, so restoring a strong local role could help keep children in local schools and lower costs for transport and specialist placements.

D) Attainment Gaps and Accountability

The East of England has the lowest Key Stage 2 attainment in England. Many children start school ‘not ready’, which affects their learning. The gap between disadvantaged pupils and others is wider here than the national average, raising particular concern for local authorities. Upcoming Ofsted inspections will focus more on inclusion, helping ensure all schools meet clear expectations for SEND and EHCPs. This should lead to a more consistent and inclusive mainstream education offer.

E) Governance and Collaboration

With a diverse education landscape, local authorities act as coordinators and advocates for all children. Working together, rather than competing, is vital to achieving good outcomes. Councils need clear cross-government strategy with defined roles to provide the best education and health services. Partnership between government and councils is especially important during periods of reorganisation or devolution.

Lead members are awaiting the government’s Schools White Paper, due in early 2026, which will set out plans to reform the SEND system and address financial challenges. Successful reform will depend on clear statutory expectations, aligned tribunal and financial processes, and maintaining effective regional commissioning arrangements. Local authorities must be able to meet their duties sustainably as changes take place.

In summary, local council education services in the East of England face increasing demand, not enough specialist staff, school sustainability risks—especially in rural areas—and ongoing attainment gaps. Addressing these issues will require coordinated action and sustained investment. A joined-up children’s strategy, with clear departmental roles and genuine partnership during reorganisation, will protect essential services and better align health, education, and care for children across the region.

4. Early years provision in East of England (from Early Education and Childcare Coalition)

Government-funded early education and childcare is delivered through several schemes, including Universal Credit, Tax-Free Childcare and funded hours entitlements. Funded hours provide the majority of support and are offered through two main routes:

- 30 hours for eligible working families, available for children aged nine months to four years (the “working families offer”)
- 15 hours for disadvantaged two-year-olds, whose parents receive certain benefits (the “disadvantaged offer”)

It was in March 2023, when the government announced the expansion of the 30-hour offer to eligible working families from when a child turns nine months old. This was rolled out in three phases, concluding in September 2025.

The resulting increase in demand has placed significant pressure on the sector, particularly around staffing. Research by [Coram](#), the [Early Years Alliance](#), the [LGA](#) and the [EECC/University of Leeds](#) challenges official figures, finding many providers unable to meet demand due to staff shortages and funding pressures, worsened by rising employment costs from April 2025.

East of England (figures from DfE’s [Survey of Childcare Providers](#))

- Last year, the number of childcare providers in the East of England increased slightly by 1.3% (2024), but total places remained stable
- Alongside the Southeast, the East of England has the highest proportion of childminders nationally accounting for 45% of all providers and 11% of all childcare places
- Group-based providers account for 41% of provision; school-based providers 14%

Access

- A recent study by the [University of Victoria](#) in Melbourne found that England ranks among the worst in Europe for childcare access and worst of the four UK nations
- 30% of England’s population live in a ‘childcare desert’, rising to 37.1% in the East of England. There is an average of 2.65 children per childcare place across the region.
- There is significant regional variation. Cambridge has the best accessibility (1.6 children per place). Thurrock has the lowest accessibility rates (3.62 children per place)

A heat map of accessibility in the East of England can be [viewed here](#).

Affordability

- Lowest average hourly fees are in Norfolk: £6.04 (two-year-olds), £5.58 (three- and four-year-olds) while the highest average hourly fees are in Southend-on-Sea: £9.76 (two-year-olds), £9.48 (three- and four-year-olds)
- Childcare costs can take up to 54% of a parent’s annual salary in the East of England. The average cost nationally of 10 hours of childcare in a nursery for a child under two is £70.51. In the East of England, this is £77.52

Future reform

The Best Start in Life Strategy (July 2025) indicates an enhanced role for combined authorities in shaping regional provision. The Child Poverty Strategy (Dec 2025) has promised a review of childcare to improve support for low-income families and address gaps that limit access.

Briefing compiled by EE APPG Secretariat from information provided by the four organisation’s speaking