



East of England

All Party Parliamentary Group

Co-Chairs: Jess Asato MP & Pam Cox MP

Vice-Chairs: Blake Stephenson MP & Marie Goldman MP

Roundtable for Parliamentarians

Ofsted Inspection Reforms and Other Educational Developments in the East of England

Held On-line on Monday, 26th January 2026

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WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

- **Jess Asato MP** welcomed attendees, introducing herself as MP for Lowestoft and Co-chair of the East of England APPG.
- She thanked the speakers for joining and noted that they would provide updates and reflections relevant to current education developments in the region.
- She confirmed that attendees should have received the short briefing paper in advance. Jess flagged a correction to the briefing paper:
 - An error appeared on page three regarding East of England Key Stage 2 attainment. The corrected point is that the East of England has one of the lowest levels of Key Stage 2 attainment, but not the lowest.
 - She confirmed this would be corrected in the final version.
- She noted that, as usual following APPG discussions, the group would send a follow-up letter to the Minister (or relevant Ministers) for Education capturing key points arising from the meeting.
- She introduced the first speaker, **Michael Sheridan** (HMI Regional Director), to outline Ofsted's recent inspection reforms.

MICHAEL SHERIDAN, HMI REGIONAL DIRECTOR, EAST OF ENGLAND

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- **Michael Sheridan** set out that Ofsted's inspection reforms follow a period of extensive reflection and consultation across the sector and wider public. He said the aim is to keep inspection focused on what is right for children and young people, provide useful information for parents, and ensure judgements are demonstrably fair, accurate, and aligned with professional expectations, reducing fear without removing necessary scrutiny.

- He described the changes as the most significant in his career and said schools report that inspections now feel different in practice: inspectors walk schools with headteachers from the outset, expect clearer self-evaluation, and assess provision more explicitly through the lens of inclusion, focusing on individual pupils' experiences, particularly those who are disadvantaged or vulnerable.
- On inclusion, he said Ofsted will still use established proxies such as free school meals and SEND (because these link to comparable data), but schools can also define additional vulnerabilities (including transitional or contextual issues) so inspectors can test how well schools identify and respond to need. He emphasised the principle that if schools are meeting the needs of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable pupils, they are more likely to be getting it right for all children, and noted that vulnerability is not always the same as low attainment.
- Michael outlined the move to a new report card, intended to give parents more information while moving away from the previous headline grading model, which consultation feedback suggested had become overly emotive and sometimes punitive. He said the five-point scale will be applied across more graded areas to produce a "spikier" profile, showing strengths alongside areas needing attention, rather than a single overall effectiveness judgement that can mask nuance in both weaker and stronger schools.
- He highlighted the new inspection toolkit, designed to be clearer about what inspectors will look at and the criteria for each judgement. He noted a shift from "best fit" to "secure fit", allowing inspectors to distinguish more precisely between elements such as curriculum and teaching quality and their impact on achievement, so schools can be recognised for doing the right work while still being held to account where outcomes have not yet improved, which he suggested is particularly relevant in areas with longstanding attainment challenges.
- On consistency, he said the Chief Inspector is strongly focused on ensuring reliability, with weekly senior-level quality assurance reviews of reports and evidence, including scrutiny of outliers. He also said inspections are now led by His Majesty's Inspectors (employed inspectors), enabling more consistent oversight and feedback than the previous model where many inspections were led periodically by Ofsted Inspectors from the sector.
- He closed by noting Ofsted's ambition to link inspection outcomes into a clearer place-based picture of what it is like to grow up in a given area, referencing the online area insights platform (searchable by area or postcode) which provides information on provision quality and contextual indicators; he added that children's home details are excluded due to sensitivity.

JONATHAN DUFF – EAST OF ENGLAND DIRECTOR, DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION

- **Jonathan Duff** outlined his role as Regional Director, working with local authorities, schools and trusts, dioceses, and MPs across children's social care, SEND, and schools to deliver the Government's opportunity mission: improving outcomes for children, families and learners, and breaking the link between background and success.
- He said the mission begins with the "best start in life", highlighting work to expand school-based nurseries and improve early years and reception quality, linked to the Government's target of 75% of children achieving a good level of development by 2028; he noted the region is currently just under 68%.
- He flagged the imminent publication of the Schools and SEND White Paper, which he said will focus on ensuring the system works for all children, particularly groups that continue to do less well, with a strong emphasis on SEND reform guided by principles he described as early, shared, effective, fair, and local.
- On SEND, Jonathan said there will be a renewed push for mainstream inclusion, enabling more children to remain in local mainstream settings while protecting specialist provision for those who need it; he added DfE expects local authorities and partnerships (including ICB and health partners) to produce reform plans demonstrating readiness, with support from DfE adviser capacity and potentially funding, subject to the White Paper.
- He highlighted a particular focus on standards in the East of England, especially at primary level, noting the region is below the national average and that performance varies significantly across places within the region.
- Jonathan set out the main improvement mechanism as the Regional Improvement for Standards and Excellence (RISE) teams, with a regional plan due later in the term focused on national priorities including reception quality, attendance, raising attainment, and mainstream inclusion; he described an ambition for a "universal offer" where every school can participate in support and collaboration.
- He described the development of new leader networks, led by high-performing practitioners, with a particular focus on: reception, Key Stage 2 and primary attainment, and disadvantage/Key Stage 4 transition into secondary.
- He noted targeted support for around 50 schools in the region that have had more than one Ofsted inspection below "good", through a two-year funded improvement programme delivered by third-party support (often another school or academy trust), with more schools expected to join as inspections continue.
- Finally, he highlighted the "keeping children safe" strand of the opportunity mission, emphasising children's social care reform and investment to strengthen multi-disciplinary safeguarding teams, with a shift towards early intervention; he also referenced work to increase kinship and foster care, and to address very high-cost placements and what he characterised as profiteering in parts of the private sector, noting that while children's services in the region are strong, care cases can be complex and costly.

CLLR PENNY CARPENTER – CHAIR, EAST OF ENGLAND EDUCATION & CHILDREN'S SERVICES NETWORK, AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES PORTFOLIO HOLDER, NORFOLK COUNTY COUNCIL

- **Cllr Penny Carpenter** thanked the APPG for the invitation and set out her core aim, as a children's services lead, of ensuring every child can achieve their potential; she drew on her own early experience of a stammer, which reduced confidence and led to bullying, to illustrate how far the system has moved from a "sink or swim" approach and why she holds a strong personal commitment to inclusion.
- She argued that education shapes children into the adults they become and therefore needs to be flexible and inclusive, providing opportunities to develop the knowledge and skills required for modern life; she said the current system is not working for too many children, especially those with special educational needs and disabilities.
- On SEND pressures, she described an unprecedented rise in demand, with Education, Health and Care Plan applications at record highs and special schools under continual pressure to adapt; she said the system has become adversarial, with many parents losing trust and feeling they must fight for support.
- She set out Norfolk's local response and the scale of the financial challenge: over 900 new specialist places created in the last five years, additional support wrapped around mainstream schools to improve inclusion, and earlier family support to reduce demand, but alongside a projected Dedicated Schools Grant deficit of £180 million; she argued this position is unsustainable and that rising spend is not translating into improved outcomes for many children and young people.
- Penny called for urgent reform to build a more inclusive system with staff better skilled at identifying needs early and supporting children to remain in local mainstream schools with peers where possible; she framed this as important both for long-term independence and participation, and for reducing the high transport costs faced by rural counties in getting children to school.
- She emphasised rurality as a structurally under-recognised factor in East of England education outcomes, highlighting long travel distances, the acute impact of falling birth rates in villages, and the risk this poses to the viability of local schools; she noted the region has many small rural schools, including in communities with high levels of second homes, and said these schools face particular challenges in delivering a broad curriculum and recruiting teachers and leaders.
- She said rural areas also feel national recruitment shortages more sharply in specialist roles (such as educational psychologists, therapists and specialist teachers), while falling rolls add further financial strain; she added that governance complexity and limited council powers, particularly over academy admissions and pupil numbers, make strategic place planning difficult and can create local competition that threatens school sustainability.

- Penny argued for a stronger local role for councils in admissions and place planning, saying current projections suggest the trend of fewer children will continue and councils currently have limited levers beyond brokering collaboration between schools and academy trusts; she linked the region's dispersed geography and high number of small primary schools to comparatively low Key Stage 2 attainment, noting that while some small schools perform strongly, overall data suggests smaller institutions underperform due to structural constraints such as recruitment difficulties for headteachers and ageing buildings, with some school estates dating back to the 1800s.
- She called for targeted investment in the education estate, stressing she was not seeking to score political points and that these issues have not been fully addressed by successive governments; she argued solutions will require cross-party work in the interests of children and families.
- Penny noted growing collaboration in Norfolk between schools, the local authority and academy trusts, and welcomed investment in SEND training, the "best start in life" focus, and Ofsted's renewed emphasis on inclusion; she also praised the resilience of teachers, leaders and local authority officers who continue to innovate and keep much of the system working despite significant pressures.
- She concluded that the system is at a turning point and said the forthcoming Schools White Paper presents a real opportunity to build an education system that works for more children; her "ask" was that government restores meaningful local powers on admissions and place planning, that inclusion becomes real in practice and is reflected in funding, and that the tribunal process becomes less adversarial and considers the whole-system picture for schools and local areas.
- She also flagged the interaction with wider reforms, warning that progress in system collaboration could be disrupted by social care reform and imminent local government reorganisation; she urged government to consider the risk of disaggregating children's services and closed by emphasising the importance of continued collaboration so children and young people across the region can flourish.

SARAH RONAN – EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, EARLY EDUCATION AND CHILDCARE COALITION

- **Sarah Ronan** introduced the Early Education and Childcare Coalition as a broad-based group representing parents, children's organisations, providers, the workforce, and the business community, and said her remarks reflected a rounded view of how different groups are experiencing early years provision.
- She reflected on the expansion of the 30-hour childcare offer to working families, noting it was announced under the previous government and rolled out largely under the current government, with the final phase implemented in September; she welcomed the Education Secretary's stated focus on early years as a top priority and said much of the recent policy development has been positive.

- Sarah said the expansion began against a difficult baseline, with the UK starting from very high childcare costs (second-highest fees in the OECD), and she argued there remains a long distance to travel in making the system more affordable and equitable.
- She described the scale and pace of the rollout as significant, characterising it as the largest expansion of childcare support in history, and said the Coalition's major concern was that it was delivered amid a workforce crisis; she cited research conducted with the University of Leeds ahead of the first phase indicating that 57% of those working in nursery settings were considering leaving the sector that year.
- Looking back across the three phases, she said DfE officials had learned from early implementation issues, but argued challenges remain, particularly around workforce retention and quality: she noted that while recruitment campaigns (including DfE's "Do Something Big") were prominent, retention of experienced staff received less emphasis, which she said is a concern given the increased number of babies entering provision following the extension down to nine months.
- She said pressure to recruit staff to meet higher demand has raised questions, among providers and parents, about the quality of provision; she emphasised that experienced staff are crucial in identifying emerging needs early and enabling timely intervention.
- Sarah welcomed the Best Start in Life strategy, pointing in particular to commitments (also reiterated in the Child Poverty Strategy) to review gaps in support for low-income families; she said this is a core Coalition focus.
- She referenced recent analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, stating that as early years investment rises (reaching around £10.5 billion this year, in her figures), it is disproportionately weighted towards middle and higher income families, with the share directed towards disadvantaged families having shifted significantly.
- On access, she argued barriers for disadvantaged families include: complex eligibility criteria and multiple overlapping offers, but also insufficient provision in the most disadvantaged areas, which she described as "childcare deserts"; she noted this can be influenced by rurality, which she said is relevant in parts of the East of England, while also reflecting wider structural features of the childcare market.
- Looking ahead, she identified two near-term policy opportunities:
 - the Government's review of childcare support for low-income families, which she suggested MPs may be hearing about from constituents; and
 - the early years funding formula consultation expected in the summer, noting the Coalition is modelling options with London Economics
- She added that funding pressures affecting settings, including cost increases such as changes to employer NI, will be relevant to providers and constituents across the region.
- She closed by saying the direction of travel for early years feels broadly positive and the Government's vision is encouraging, but cautioned that fiscal constraints remain significant and that further progress is needed before the system feels fairer and more equal for every child and community.

Q&A DISCUSSION – THEMES ARISING

Linking “Pride in Place” investment to education and childcare sufficiency

- **Pam Cox MP, Co-Chair of the East of England APPG**, asked how Pride in Place funding (noting 18 areas in the East of England, £20 million over 10 years) could connect more clearly with education and wider local priorities in disadvantaged communities.
- **Jess Asato MP** noted she had not previously considered direct links to education providers beyond ensuring young people have a voice in shaping local delivery; she suggested this could be explored with other funded areas.
- **Jonathan Duff** said he had not had conversations about Pride in Place funding, as education funding is largely separate, but said he would be interested in exploring any “virtuous connection” if partners can identify practical linkages.
- **Sarah Ronan** proposed a specific early years’ angle: using community premises to support childminders operating in non-domestic settings, helping tackle isolation and sustain provision in rural areas. She cited a decline in childminder numbers and referenced analysis suggesting the current trajectory could remove childminders entirely by 2033.
- **Mike Sheridan** supported the idea, noting Ofsted would be the registering body for non-domestic childminding premises and said he would welcome further discussions, particularly given rural sufficiency challenges and the potential to use school space or regeneration projects to create shared, registrable childcare premises.

School funding formula and high-needs deficits

- **Pippa Heylings MP, South Cambridgeshire**, asked whether forthcoming reforms could create an opportunity to change the national funding formula, describing concerns in parts of the region (including Cambridge) about relative allocations and perceived penalties linked to growth.
- She also asked what will happen to existing local authority high-needs deficits as the system changes, warning that if historic deficits remain with councils, there is a risk of Section 114-style financial failure in some places.
- **Jonathan Duff** said he was not aware of any planned changes to the national funding formula at present but would update the group if this changes.
- On deficits, he acknowledged the issue is “very live” and said the Government’s intent is to reform SEND in a way that is more affordable going forward, including through increased mainstream inclusion, but that does not resolve historic debt; he indicated further clarity may come via the local government finance settlement expected in early February, and that any approach to historic deficits is likely to be linked to the reform programme set out in the White Paper.

School food standards, quality, and budget pressures

- **Marie Goldman MP, Chelmsford** raised concerns about the quality of school food, particularly in secondary settings, drawing on school visits where she observed prominent availability of high-sugar, low-nutrition options during the school day.
- **Jonathan Duff** recognised the issue and noted some school groups and academy trusts report success in securing higher quality food through scale, though he accepted this is not universal. He referenced published school food standards applying to maintained schools and academies, including expectations around providing a good range of foods and fresh ingredients, and said these standards are periodically reviewed. He offered to connect Marie with the relevant DfE team and provide an update when circulating his presentation, noting current work on breakfast clubs as part of wider efforts.
- **Jess Asato MP** added that recent policy changes expanding free school meals for children in households on Universal Credit are welcome, but she is hearing from headteachers that the change may be creating additional pressure on school budgets if funding does not cover delivery costs.

Children's social care thresholds, early intervention, and domestic abuse referrals

- **Jess Asato MP** raised concerns from local headteachers about referrals into children's social care, particularly around domestic abuse, where schools report outcomes of "no further action" or limited feedback after referral, leaving schools feeling they are holding risk without adequate external support.
- She asked how forthcoming reforms (including the Children's Wellbeing Bill, multi-agency working expectations, and guidance) will strengthen early intervention and ensure schools' safeguarding concerns are responded to effectively.
- **Jonathan Duff** said he would expect multi-agency teams to make sound professional judgements, including directing cases appropriately to early help or statutory intervention depending on evidence. He suggested that if there are consistent patterns indicating a problem, these should be escalated, noting that inspection and assurance routes exist.
- **Mike Sheridan** agreed escalation is appropriate where thresholds appear misapplied, and said Ofsted's ILACS inspections (with CQC involvement) consider local authority services, including safeguarding and escalation processes. He said they are not currently seeing widespread evidence of endemic poor decision-making on thresholds, but would keep this under review and welcomed further information; Jess Asato indicated she may follow up in writing.

Ofsted methodology: use of a small cohort of vulnerable pupils and perceived pressure

- A question was raised about early feedback on the practice of selecting a small number of disadvantaged or vulnerable pupils (described as six) for closer review during inspections, and whether this creates undue pressure on those pupils.
- **Mike Sheridan** said he has heard that feedback but considers it overstated; he described the approach as identifying around six to eight vulnerable or disadvantaged pupils to review support and outcomes, including looking at work and provision, without singling pupils out publicly or implying they “make or break” a judgement.
- He said inspectors use the process to understand pupil journeys and variations, and he has not seen the stigmatising practice described by critics; he added that if inappropriate practice is observed it would be addressed.
- **Jess Asato MP** noted that many stakeholders have long asked Ofsted to better reflect the experience of children with SEND, care experience, or young carers, and argued the inclusion focus is important provided it does not stigmatise pupils.

Teacher recruitment and rural/coastal workforce constraints

- **Jess Asato MP** asked what is being done, beyond national campaigns, to address teacher shortages in rural and coastal parts of the East of England.
- **Jonathan Duff** referenced national measures: the commitment to recruit 6,500 new teachers, the “Every Lesson Shapes a Life” campaign, international recruitment, and improved training and early-career support, alongside bursaries and incentives in priority subjects (such as sciences, computing and maths).
- Regionally, he said the most effective approach he sees is where multi-school groups and academy trusts create career pathways across a geographical footprint, enabling teachers to move between locations as part of progression (for example, from larger centres to coastal or more isolated areas), which can make harder-to-recruit schools more attractive when not experienced in isolation; he acknowledged recruitment remains difficult in some coastal areas but argued this model offers the most practical route to improvement.

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

- **Jess Asato MP** thanked all speakers for their time and contributions, recognising the value of the discussion for informing the APPG’s ongoing work.
- She noted the APPG would follow up in the usual way by sending a letter to the relevant Minister(s), capturing issues the group wishes to continue pursuing.
- Finally the Chair expressed regret that more MPs had not been able to attend, but acknowledged it was a particularly busy Monday in Parliament.

ATTENDEES – PARLIAMENTARIANS

Name	Constituency
Jess Asato – Co Chair	Lowestoft
Pam Cox – Co-chair	Colchester
Marie Goldman – Vice Chair	Chelmsford
James Wild	North West Norfolk
Pippa Heylings	South Cambridgeshire

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Disclaimer: Please note that this is a non-verbatim meeting note. While it draws in part on a transcript of the session, contributions have been summarised and edited for clarity and conciseness. Speakers should not be taken to have expressed these points in precisely the terms recorded here.