

Suffolk County Council – new opportunities in children’s services to lead an outstanding team

With its talented workforce and unerring commitment to children’s services, Suffolk County Council was the ideal career move for Sarah-Jane Smedmor.

She is now looking for five people to join her team in roles that will play a crucial part in driving improvement across this diverse county.

Having joined in the summer as executive director for children and young people, the job has proved every bit as rewarding as she expected.

On the one hand, it’s about leading a rebuilding process for children’s services that were ‘outstanding’ just five years ago but this year were rated ‘requires improvement to be good’ by Ofsted. In addition to that is the need to accelerate the pace of progress within SEND provision alongside colleagues within the local area partnership.

‘The Ofsted report said “requires improvement” but the practitioners we have here are outstanding,’ says Sarah-Jane. ‘I knew I could be successful here because of the quality of staff and the level of commitment and support from the chief executive and members. I’ll offer that same support to everyone coming in.’

On top of that, the council provides ‘fantastic scaffolding’ via everything from HR and IT to finance that enable service areas to thrive.

She believes Suffolk’s ability to offer the ideal conditions for children’s services leaders to succeed will prove enticing to experienced practitioners around the country.

In return, those taking up the roles of service director for inclusion, education and learning, service director for social care and family help, assistant director for inclusion, assistant director for transformation and improvement and head of SEND services will together help to create the conditions for the workforce to succeed.

‘This is an amazing opportunity and a great time to join us. We have



had to really think about who we are and where we want to go in terms of our ambition for children.

‘It’s exciting for the right leaders – these people need to have great values and behaviours to be able to lead really good practitioners. We need to create the conditions for them to be successful in order to get us to “good” and then hopefully back to “outstanding”.

The recruitment drive underlines the council’s commitment to children’s services, says Sarah-Jane, with both service directors and the assistant director for transformation and improvement all being newly-created roles.

The overriding aim is to invest in greater strategic capacity to address areas of improvement identified by Ofsted in social care and SEND.

‘It’s about being part of a high-performing team, leading with kindness and compassion and understanding the story of what has gone before,’ she explains. ‘Parents,



carers and children didn’t experience services in the best possible way and we need to work with them to address that.

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‘If that excites people then they are the right people to come and join us and be involved into those conversations.’

That’s particularly the case with the service director for inclusion, education and learning, who will build relationships across schools, the parent-carer forum and the wider system.

‘It’s about being a strategic person with the vision to ensure we do the right thing for children at the right time – working with schools to be more inclusive and helping us to understand current and future demand.’

The assistant director for transformation and improvement will work across children’s services to drive improvement in social care

The work of both assistant directors will create the conditions for the new head of SEND to thrive, she says, enabling them to forge ahead with a range of improvements.

Sarah-Jane believes the five newcomers will be as bowled over by Suffolk as she is.

‘This is my 29th year in local authority children’s services and the buildings we have are the nicest I’ve worked in. The county offers such a richness of contrasts that make it an interesting place to work and a beautiful place to live.’

She adds: ‘We have all the ingredients for success here. Members of the parent-carer forum are very supportive of the new roles and are looking forward to being part of the recruitment process through the stakeholder panel, as well as working with the new recruits.

‘When you’re joining somewhere that’s on an improvement journey you don’t often start with practitioners as good as we’ve got. We just need the right team of people who can help shape the vision, bring their own ideas and take us forward.’ ■



Sarah-Jane Smedmor – Executive Director for Children and Young People, Suffolk County Council

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