



Suffolk Safeguarding Partnership

01 April 2020

Dear Colleagues,

The stress of the lockdown is affecting many individuals and families across Suffolk.

Equally powerfully, the response by the people of Suffolk to the danger of Covid-19 has been brilliant – from individuals, families, professionals and from the voluntary sector including new volunteers, still to be deployed, who have come forward in unprecedented numbers from all walks of life. Whilst NHS staff have worked themselves into the ground to help people falling sick, so too have others like care workers, social workers, teachers, police officers, probation officers – there are too many to list. This is a response by the whole of the Suffolk public sector and also by those in the private sector who have acted incredibly responsibly despite the costs and threats to their businesses.

Of course, there have been problems every day on the ground. That is inevitable, but the way in which a team has been put around the problem to deal with as well as possible has been exemplary.

I want to draw equal attention to the continuing risks faced by vulnerable children, families and adults throughout Suffolk. The danger from Covid-19 should not distract us from the plight of those who face other dangers, usually in their own homes. These dangers include physical abuse, sexual abuse and exploitation, financial abuse, emotional abuse and neglect, including self-neglect. Prior to the pandemic, vast numbers of professional staff, relatives and friends were protecting the most vulnerable people in Suffolk by frequent visiting and through many programmes of care and support being provided via a co-ordinated care plan. Many of those programmes have suddenly though quite properly been stopped because of the curb on movement and the ever-tougher social distancing requirement. This means less care and support going in and fewer checks and balances against abuse and neglect.

Part of my role is to hold to account the statutory agencies in Suffolk about child protection and adult protection. I am satisfied that the needs of the most vulnerable in Suffolk are still being met as far as possible, with home visits still being made: with multi-agency joint working still taking place; and with good systems for classifying priorities as not all can be met.

For example, our special schools have developed a methodology to continue to support vulnerable children in their own homes. All schools continue to support and watch out for their vulnerable students despite schools being closed. Child protection visits are being made and new investigations are being carried out.

Endeavour House, 8 Russell Road, Ipswich. IP1 2BX

Working in partnership across Suffolk to safeguard children, young people and adults

Adult care and safeguarding services have maintained business as usual, despite the Government granting a relaxation of some requirements on them in the current crisis. Care homes are under particular pressure. They cannot send some of their residents to hospital for obvious reason as they would have done until a few weeks ago. They will also have to accept people from hospital for end of life care who would before have remained in hospital. They need to use isolation protocols for symptomatic residents. Care homes in Suffolk have been incentivised to keep their doors open for the next 3 months. This is also important for adults at risk, so that they are not hidden behind closed doors where no one can see them and where checks and balances on their safety are impossible to guarantee.

The police and Trading Standards are aware of the well-publicised risks from criminals exploiting vulnerable people living on their own with less scrutiny. This is one of many ways in which community vigilance can help to protect lives and livelihoods.

A major concern I have is the length of time the current restrictions will last for. A long haul of several months is likely, so we need to be developing a set of working practices which can be sustained over this length of time. In this respect, the protection of the most vulnerable is no different from what is being done in other sectors. We have to drop non-essential work, do as much as we can from home and work online or use audio and video technology for all meetings, reviews and planning sessions. However, most support for vulnerable people and front-line work by the NHS and the police has to carry on face to face. If you are being abused or neglected, you have to feel you can trust a social worker or a police officer, before you can safely disclose what has been going on for you. Vulnerable people usually worry about the consequences and repercussions of talking openly. Trust and confidence have to be built up face to face through instant rapport if possible.

Vulnerable people can never be completely protected. Only the elimination of cruelty and hate could do that. One crucial protection vulnerable people do have is an army of people whose sole mission is to help them being out and about in the community every day. The public space is becoming deserted. The risk of emptying the public space is that more vulnerable people are hidden in plain sight as well as now being trapped behind closed doors, possibly with someone or with a group who puts them at risk. I hope the public space can be re-opened as soon as possible, so that channels of escape from violence and exploitation become easier to find. However, a medium-term lockdown is more likely so we have to listen out that much more carefully to the voices of children and adults at risk behind those closed doors.

We must also take care not to unintentionally create a pandemic of fear. The risk of a different epidemic, this time of low-level anxiety in the general population, is significant. Vulnerable people live or die in the margins. Just enough money. Just enough resolve. Just enough energy. The current situation is a war on those margins and the current anxiety level may well trigger a raft of mental health difficulties that will put an even greater strain on already overstretched services. So, in doing everything possible to ensure one part of the NHS can cope, we may be causing the same problem for another part of the NHS in a year or two. Mental health difficulties can never attract public and political support in the way the risk of not being able to breathe does. I worry that social distancing is making people suspicious about whoever they are next to. We will all have to work hard to make the public space feel safe when it is populated again.

The scale of the national effort to mobilise support for health and social care has been phenomenal. The majority of altruists are showing up the minority of apathetic bystanders. So yes, there is more bed blocking as care homes can't admit new patients. Some children in care are being returned by private children's homes who can no longer carry the risk as they see it.

But these concerns have to be balanced with the daily measures being put in place by overworked public sector staff, including oversight of the most vulnerable in their own homes and in care homes and arranging care and support at short notice. The contrast between the minority in the population who are now round the clock key workers and the majority in the population who are confined at home is stark. The call to volunteer which is a form of National Service will be crucial in the challenging months ahead, to help keep keyworkers themselves safe from the risks they face – on top of exhaustion from the intense emotional labour they do, the risk of becoming infected themselves. So remember our safeguarders from all sectors – they have to give of themselves several times every day, because for the person they are protecting, it may be their only chance of survival.

To share a concern or to report abuse or neglect in any of its forms, use existing phone numbers or e mail addresses. The main ones are still:

For Adults:

- customer.first@suffolk.gov.uk
- 0800 917 1109

For Children:

- customer.first@suffolk.gov.uk
- 0808 800 4005

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Anthony". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Anthony Douglas CBE
Independent Chair
Suffolk Safeguarding Partnership