

Sue Thomas. Designated Clinical Officer, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight

Introduction to Sue's profile

Sue is the Designated Clinical Officer, and her post is hosted by North East Hampshire & Farnham CCG. Her position covers the five Hampshire Clinical Commissioning Groups and the Isle of Wight CCG. Sue is employed full-time and she has held the post since 2017.

350,000 children live in Hampshire (excluding Southampton and Portsmouth), of which at least 35,000 children have special educational needs. 8,500 of those children have an EHC Plan. Hampshire County Council has one Local Authority and five CCGs, which work in partnership together. The Isle of Wight has one Local Authority and 1,100 EHC Plans.

Sue's work and responsibilities as a DCO

Sue sees herself as the person who ensures that the CCG meets its statutory responsibilities under the Children and Families Act 2014. Sue emphasises that the aim of the DCO role is to ensure that commissioning decisions are effectively responding to children's needs. "It's about intelligence gathering and being able to share information with commissioners that then informs how services are designed and delivered." The DCO has unique oversight of the system around SEND, developed through working with the local authority, health and care providers, and the clinical commissioning groups. "We are the voice of the child: someone has to speak for them".

Sue has taken on some new responsibilities since she started to work for the Isle of Wight. For example, she represented the CCG at the single route of redress and SEND Tribunal and oversees some of the Children's Continuing Care plans. At the moment, she is working on training programmes to support service providers to understand their roles and responsibilities around SEND.

Sue is also closely involved in the SE19 DCO/DMO Forum – the regional network for DCOs and DMOs in the South East of England. Sue has been a part of this group since the first meeting in January 2017, and has benefited from coming together with other DCOs and DMOs to share information, advice and examples of best practice.

Being the DCO for Hampshire and the Isle of Wight

Sue spends a significant part of her time maintaining the Local Offer. This is a big piece of work, particularly considering the size of the area she covers. Her role is to make sure that the information provided is correct and to work with Hampshire and the Isle of Wight to finalise content. Hampshire supports Sue's work by connecting her with their Families and Information Services, and keeping her up to date about new services in the region.

Sue explains that the DCO role is a demanding and a diverse job. Being the only DCO in her local area also makes it more difficult to support joint commissioning and the monitoring EHC plans. Working with six CCGs, Sue also finds tracking information across the health system very challenging. Knowledge of the health system, particularly around the transition to adult services and requirements for joint commissioning, is crucial in her role. Sue also believes it is essential to understand your population needs, in order to identify gaps and to inform commissioning processes. "Being a good, open and honest communicator is key," said Sue.

For Sue, the DCO role is the most rewarding job she has ever had, and she feels she's able to make a real difference for children and young people in this role. "The DCO can put the best interests of the child at the centre of their work, and can support children and young people to grow in a way that will change their whole lives," she said.

The impact of the DCO role on Children and Young People with SEND

Supporting participation of children and young people with SEND is a crucial part of Sue's work. Sue raised awareness of the necessity to redesign services in co-production with young people and families. She also works closely with her local Parent Carer Forum. Sue advises other DCOs to meet Parent Carer Forum members separately from the CCG from time to time, as the conversation can be different. "These are their services, we need to hear from them what they would like to experience and what needs to change," said Sue.

Sue also encourages her DCO and DMO colleagues to bring children and young people to board meetings, where they can share their stories. "Those words carry much more weight than any written report," said Sue.

Sue also emphasises the importance of pushing SEND up the priority list, for example by bringing SEND issues to meetings of senior leaders and governing bodies. Sue also highlighted the importance of making the DCO

role statutory, in order to highlight the importance of the position. “The DCO role is key to the early identification of and support for SEND,” she said, “it needs to be fully recognised”.

Example of good practice: a multi-agency approach

Sue recently helped to build an appropriate package of support for a child with complex health needs including tracheostomy, placed in a mainstream school. To ensure the child’s needs were fully understood and the right support was put in place, Sue arranged 6-weekly meetings with the family, their case manager and all professionals involved in the EHC plan. Holding these meetings alongside formal assessments, reviews for Continuing Care, Child in Need assessment, and annual review of the child’s EHC plan, permitted the child and the family to express their views more freely, without feeling judged. This process enabled more meaningful participation and ensured the final support package effectively reflected the child and family’s needs and would support them to achieve their outcomes. Sue also believes that investing in the right support at this stage will support the child’s independence, ultimately reduce spending in the long-term, and improve the health and wellbeing of the family as a whole.

Sue’s advice for a new starter

Sue would recommend any DCO starting in the role start by looking through the available resources on the position, such as the Council for Disabled Children’s DMO/DCO handbook. She also suggests arranging meetings with the people you will need to work with and influence, including head teachers at special and mainstream schools, health and care providers, your local Parent Carer Forum, youth participation groups and the Senior Management Team at the CCG. Building these relationships will also help you to develop an understanding of your local population and their needs. Sue also advises new DCOs and DMOs to join national and regional networks and to seek support from others in the role.

