

CHILDREN AND LIFELONG LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL

DATE	25/01/2024
REPORT OF	Ann-Marie Matson, Director of Children's Services
SUBJECT	Children's Services Improvement Journey
STATUS	Open

CONTRIBUTION TO OUR AIMS

Improving services for children is one of the core priorities within the Council Plan.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Led by the North East Lincolnshire Council (NELC) Children's Services Leadership Team, and supported by our Sector Led Improvement Partners (SLIP), progress continues to be made as part of the Children's Services improvement journey.

The outcomes of the most recent Ofsted Monitoring Visit, which was focussed around exploitation, demonstrated a positive trend in relation to transformation and work is underway in preparedness for the upcoming monitoring visit which is focussed around permanence.

There is an ongoing and amplified commitment to delivering, at pace, the significant change needed to ensure best practice across Children's Services in the context of the identified priorities and ambition of the Council Plan and the continuing improvement journey and plan.

MATTERS FOR CONSIDERATION

This report seeks to update scrutiny panel members on NELC's Children's Services improvement journey and ensure that scrutiny members are briefed on the performance and implementation of the transformation programme that will deliver the Improvement Plan.

1. BACKGROUND AND ISSUES

- 1.1. NELC Children's Services were judged to be Inadequate by Ofsted in October 2021.
- 1.2. Significant work has been undertaken and is ongoing to make improvements across the service, and since October 2022, NELC has benefited from SLIP support from Lincolnshire County Council.
- 1.3. An Improvement Plan has been agreed via the Continuous Improvement Board, which is chaired by the DfE, which has been mobilised by NELC Children's Services, with support from SLIP, and also the Council's Transformation Team.

1.4. We anticipate further quarterly monitoring visits, ahead of the next full ILACS Ofsted Monitoring Visit which is expected in Autumn/Winter 2024/25.

2. RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

2.1. Building on collaborative working to date, a new vision of 'Our Children Our Future' has been developed and there are further opportunities to roll this out across Children's Services, the Council and the wider partnership, to be underpinned by strategic planning, governance and reporting processes.

2.2. A new Director of Children's Services commenced in post in December 2023, along with a Service Director Safeguarding Family Help and Youth Justice, a Service Director Regulated Services, and a Head of Children's Strategy Vision and Evaluation. Six Deputy Service Directors have also been appointed and will commence in post by end February 2024.

2.3. The newly appointed Leadership Team, along with leaders, managers and staff across the workforce, will continue to work at pace to drive forward significant change. This will provide the platform for development and retention, fostering a cross Council culture of 'families first' and family help and intervention (with our partners) to ensure the best outcomes for children, young people and families, in the context of our local vision and priorities.

2.4. Taking account of recent audit activity and management oversight, and some evidence of non-compliance, there is an amplified focus on ensuring regulatory compliance i.e. in relation to children in care (including placement with parents), children's homes (including a focus on regulation 24's), fostering (including private fostering) and care leaver service.

2.5. If we are unable to deliver against our local vision and priorities to further progress our improvement journey, this will likely have a detrimental impact on children, young people and families experiences and outcomes; it would also contribute to significant financial and reputational risk to NELC; and may result in ongoing and strengthened DfE intervention.

3. REPUTATION AND COMMUNICATIONS CONSIDERATIONS

3.1. There is a dedicated communications officer linked to Children's Services which is contributing to enhanced, proactive and responsive communications across the workforce and from an external perspective.

3.2. There does remain a reputational risk of NELC not achieving its improvement aspirations, which may impact on the morale, wellbeing and retention of current staff, and discourage potential new starters. However, utilising the capacity identified above, there is an amplified focus on raising awareness of the recruitment opportunities across NELC Children's Services; on promoting NELC as a place to work; and on building relationships with key partners across the place of North East Lincolnshire.

4. FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

- 4.1. The financial envelope associated with Children's Services is significantly impacting on wider NELC finances. Significant areas of spending which are contributing to the overspend include managing disproportionately high populations and demand, the cost of agency social workers, and the cost of external placements. .
- 4.2. A continued focus on key improvement priorities will result in improving the quality of practice, reducing demand and meeting need at the lowest level which will contribute to reducing the overall cost to the authority.
- 4.3. The DfE continue to provide additional support, both direct to NELC and through Lincolnshire County Council as SLIP partners. In addition, there are opportunities to draw down additional DfE funding to contribute to implementing our vision and delivering against our improvement priorities.
- 4.4. Stage 3 of the Supporting Families Programme Payment by Results continues to prove challenging. The increased number of outcomes and evidence required is impacting on North East Lincolnshire, as it is with many authorities across the country, and we are working closely with DfE to ensure we can maximise local income. Specific plans in relation to exploring all cohorts of families whilst developing a fully automated approach to generating claims are being finalised

5. CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IMPLICATIONS

5.1. Improvement journey: recent areas of focus and key highlights

- 5.1.1. Following on from the creation of the Senior Leadership Team, work is progressing to develop the new Children's Services structure. The initial scope has focussed on creating a competitive offer and salary, alongside a clear progression criteria for social workers, as well as creating additional capacity to develop a sustainable infrastructure to ensure a safe system across the scope of children's services. Proposals are pending to develop other key posts under the respective Deputy Service Director portfolios, to take the next step in delivering the significant change needed to ensure best practice across Children's Services, in the context of the Council priorities and the continuing improvement journey and plan. Discussions are underway with HR and consultation and engagement is planned with unions and staff.
- 5.1.2. Building on established communication mechanisms, the DCS is continuing with the weekly update as a means of sharing key messages and updates. In addition, the DCS initiated a whole service Q/A session with the Senior Leadership Team on 18/12/23, which was attended by 177 staff across Children's Services and has also established an 'open door' opportunity for Q/A by being based at Civic offices on a routine/regular basis. A whole service 'vision' event is also proposed for February 2024 and this will be in the

context of a wider workforce engagement and communications framework, which is in development.

- 5.1.3. The Family Hubs and Start for Life universal offer continues to develop with an increased number of groups and activities across the four current sites delivering; and parental feedback is very positive.
- 5.1.4. Over the last quarter, the Integrated Front Door has seen a reduction in safeguarding referrals and an increased in contacts for family help. This follows the launch of the new Early Help Strategy and assessment, as well as the multi-agency referral form being switched off. The quality of referrals continues to improve enabling informed, timely decision making for children.
- 5.1.5. There is an improved system to track children who are subject to proceedings and pre-proceedings, and there will be ongoing work to ensure that our data improves and that children will not be subject to drift and delay within public law. There is a sharpened focus on the systems and frameworks in place for children entering care.
- 5.1.6. Performance data to track and monitor strategy discussions and section 47's has been developed. The quality and impact of strategy discussions including the partner information sharing to inform decision making, the quality of investigation plans and the co-ordination of sharing outcomes is a focus and a partnership training plan will strengthen this further.
- 5.1.7. There is a permanent and experience staff group within the Adoption Team, and early discussions are being had to expand the training / workshop opportunities to share their knowledge and experience across the wider workforce.
- 5.1.8. Work has been undertaken to model the potential financial offer to foster carers to take account of the skills and current knowledge as well as foster carers ongoing commitment to their learning and development, with the intention that children with the highest need will be placed with our most professionally competent carers.
- 5.1.9. There is a continued focus on fostering recruitment and retention of foster carers to increase the availability of local fostering households. This includes linking into local businesses and an increased presence at community events.
- 5.1.10. The YOUUnique awards were held in November 2023 which were well attended and well received, not least as an opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate the achievements of our children in care and care leavers, and those who care and support them. There is an agreement in principle to hold another event in 2024, and feedback has been sought to build on and further improve the arrangements.

- 5.1.11. Work has continued in relation to the recommendations from the National Leaving Care Advisor, Mark Ridell's visit, which focussed on the local offer for care leavers. The return visit will now take place in May/June 2024 and further analysis of the progress and further actions required is in developments to inform future planning in relation to leaving care.
- 5.1.12. Due to the size of the care population, a substantial increase in the number of care leavers is anticipated in 2024/25 and 2025/26. As such, the capacity of the leaving care service is to be considered to ensure it is able to meet demand.
- 5.1.13. A number of significant policy drivers were published in December 2023, including the new iteration of Working Together to Safeguarding Children 2023. Work is underway to understand the implications and opportunities associated with the drivers, which are being fed into relevant governance and partnership processes as appropriate.
- 5.1.14. Work is underway to undertake a progress review of the current iteration of the Improvement Plan, and a refreshed Improvement Plan will be shared via the Tactical Improvement Board and Continuous Improvement Board for consideration and endorsement as appropriate. Examples of ongoing and emerging improvement priorities include workforce; sufficiency; infrastructure development; regulatory compliance; consistency and quality of supervision and management; managing populations and demand; stakeholder voice and engagement; corporate parenting and the Safeguarding Children Partnership.

5.2. Children's Social Care performance update

- 5.2.1. There is continued oversight of performance across Children's Services on a day-to-day basis, and routine reporting, oversight and tracking in the context of the Tactical Improvement Board and Continuous Improvement Board. Key headlines include:
 - 5.2.1.1. Early Help currently has 497 open cases with caseloads steadily decreasing since June 2023. Early Help workers are also supporting 393 cases open to social care services.
 - 5.2.1.2. There has been a large increase in external Team Around the Family's (TAFs) being started, with 96 in November and 85 in December 2023. Over the last two months we have seen external TAFs being started by health professionals and voluntary organisations, which is positive. In total 411 external TAFs have been started by partners since March 2023.

- 5.2.1.3. Demand has reduced since October 2023, with 169 referrals received in December 2023, which is below the rolling monthly average of 180 referrals. Section 47s have also reduced with only 33 Section 47s initiated in December 2023 which is much reduced from the rolling average of 69 a month.
- 5.2.1.4. The number of cases open to social care services has also dropped for a second month with 1081 cases open at month end, equivalent to a rate of 545 per 10,000. This has almost reached the improvement plan target set of 1756 open cases by March 2024.
- 5.2.1.5. 96% of all assessments were completed within statutory timescales in December 2023, bringing our in-year assessment timeliness rate to 89% and almost to the improvement plan target of 90%.
- 5.2.1.6. 100% of ICPCs were held in timescales during December 2023, bringing our in-year rate to 78%. This is still well below the improvement plan target of 95% but is nearing the statistical neighbour average of 83%. Only 1 ICPC has been held out of timescales since August 2023.
- 5.2.1.7. Children in need numbers have been decreasing since September 2023 with 698 CIN as at end of December 2023. This is well below the improvement plan target of 800.
- 5.2.1.8. The current number of children on a child protection plan is 266, which is equivalent to a rate of 81 per 10,000. The numbers have reduced for a second month and have seen a 9% reduction since October 2023.
- 5.2.1.9. The current number of children in care is 522. Numbers have continued to steadily decrease and we continue to see much lower numbers of children entering care each month. Only seven children entered care in December 2023, three of whom stepped up from child protection and two of whom were unaccompanied asylum seeking children.
- 5.2.1.10. Children in need and children in care visits remain consistently in line with target set of 90%, although child protection visits are still variable and were at 83% as of December 2023 but have increased to 87% as of 9th January 2024.
- 5.2.1.11. Current average caseloads for frontline social workers is 19, which is in line with last month. The current highest caseload is 27 for one worker.

5.2.1.12. The percentage of supervisions held is quite low, as detailed below, though there is a amplified focus on management supervision and oversight

- CASS 85%
- Children's Disability Service 77%
- Children in Care Team 67%
- New Futures 75%

6. CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

6.1. No impact

7. MONITORING COMMENTS

7.1. This report does not contain recommended changes to policy or resources (people, finance or physical assets). As a result no monitoring comments have been sought from the Council's Monitoring Officer (Chief Legal Officer), Section 151 Officer (Director of Finance) or Strategic Workforce Lead.

8. WARD IMPLICATIONS

8.1. All wards impacted

9. BACKGROUND PAPERS

9.1. None

10. CONTACT OFFICER(S)

10.1 Ann-Marie Matson, Director of Children's Services

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