

# CHILDREN AND LIFELONG LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL

<b>DATE</b>	16/01/2025
<b>REPORT OF</b>	Ann-Marie Matson, Director of Children's Services
<b>SUBJECT</b>	Children's Services Social Care Improvement Journey
<b>STATUS</b>	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 Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and supported by Sector Led Improvement Partners (SLIP), progress continues to be made as part of the Children's Services improvement journey.

Taking account of our journey to date, the reset on our vision and ambition, consideration regarding progress on our inaugural Improvement Plan and findings from recent monitoring visits, we have refined our Improvement Plan for 2024/25 and reset our strategic objectives and priority areas of focus, in the scope of the following strategic objectives:

- Embedding our empowering leadership and management approach
- Help, support and protect our children, young people and families
- Deliver a high quality offer for children in our care
- Delivery a high quality offer for care leavers
- Develop the quality of our learning and education landscape for all children

Led by the DfE Commissioner, the Continuous Improvement Board continues to oversee the improvement plan progress, impact and outcomes in the context of high support and high challenge, and there is an amplified focus on inspection preparedness in lieu of the pending Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services in 2025.

## 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 ongoing Improvement Plan.

### 1. BACKGROUND AND ISSUES

- 1.1. New SLIP arrangements were enacted from the end March 2024, which demonstrated confidence in the NELC leadership and management team's capacity to co-ordinate and facilitate the improvement arrangements. A robust SLIP delivery programme is in place involving four Local Authority SLIP partners (North Tyneside, Camden, Leeds and North Yorkshire), along with individual SLIP delivery partners, all of whom are contributing to the implementation of our priority areas of focus.
- 1.2. The most recent Ofsted Monitoring Visit was undertaken in September 2024, with a focus on children in need (CIN) and children in need of protection (CP). Ofsted

found that since January 2023, children subject to CIN/CP planning are better safeguarded. The full report is available here: [NELC Ofsted Monitoring Visit September 2024](#).

## 2. RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

- 2.1. In the context of the Improvement Plan, a risk register is routinely updated and reported into Continuous Improvement Board. This was refreshed in November 2024 to ensure alignment with the revised Improvement Plan. Where agreed, risks have been removed as they have been deemed to be decreasing / resolved, and mitigating actions are in place and ongoing for all remaining risks, which have been deemed to be decreasing and stable.
- 2.2. As we move forwards in our improvement journey, opportunities to drive forward transformational change, include:
  - **WORKFORCE:** Permanent, experienced leadership and management team now in place, and change management processes progressed as required to ensure additional / appropriate capacity to drive forward practice improvements and transformational change. Ongoing focus on workforce development including recruitment and retention
  - **QUALITY OF PRACTICE:** Creating the conditions to enhance the consistency and quality of practice i.e. as a result of an amplified focus on supervision, direct work
  - **SECTOR LED IMPROVEMENT:** Utilising the added value of sector led support to enhance our improvement journey leading to practice improvements
  - **FINANCIAL ENVELOPE:** Using the money that's in the system to best effect (including through core and grant funding) and operate in the context of high challenge and high support in relation to commissioned arrangements
  - **MANAGING POPULATIONS AND DEMAND:** Refreshed practice approach and threshold document, with partners integrated into the front door
  - **PARTNERSHIPS:** Amplified focus on how partners/partnerships contribute to the children's system and ensuring opportunities for high challenge and high support; building on refresh of governance arrangements e.g. via the development and implementation of associated strategies
  - **SYSTEMS AND PROCESSES:** Performance and data are key enablers and pending rationalisation of education systems and changes to Liquid Logic, will be key to managing populations and demand and ensuring effective assurance and oversight
  - **CORPORATE PARENTING:** Raising awareness of corporate parenting responsibilities that contribute to the development and implementation of the corporate parenting offer and care leaver offer
  - **SUFFICIENCY:** Ongoing amplified focus on the foster friendly initiative and the development of the fostering offer to value and increase the number of foster carers; and the development of our children's home provision, and supported accommodation / housing options

- **LISTEN, LEARN, REVIEW, ADAPT:** Through our assurance framework (taking account of voice, performance/data and practice wisdom), we are able to listen, learn, review and adapt to continue to make progress and improve outcomes
- **POLICY DRIVERS:** Take account of key policy drivers i.e. Keeping children safe, helping families thrive to further develop our transformation agenda

### 3. REPUTATION AND COMMUNICATIONS CONSIDERATIONS

- 3.1. There is dedicated communications officer capacity linked to Children's Services which is contributing to enhanced, proactive and responsive communications across the workforce and from an external perspective, including in the context of our amplified focus on recruitment marketing activity.
- 3.2. We continue to promote NELC as a place to work; and there is an ongoing focus on building relationships with key partners across the place of North East Lincolnshire. This is having a demonstrable positive impact on recruitment.

### 4. FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

- 4.1. The DfE have directly awarded improvement funding to NELC which demonstrates their confidence in our capacity to manage our improvement priorities.
- 4.2. The continuing approach to our priority areas of focus is showing a positive impact on the budget trajectories, in the context of investing to save. We are also providing high challenge and high support across partnerships to ensure all are consistently and comparatively contributing to the local children's agenda.
- 4.3. A continued focus on key improvement priorities will result in continued improvements in the quality of practice, reducing demand and meeting need at the lowest level which will contribute to good financial management and planning.

### 5. CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IMPLICATIONS

#### 5.1. Improvement journey: recent areas of focus and key highlights against our strategic objectives

##### 5.1.1. Embed our empowering leadership and management approach

- DCS thematic assurance session held in November 2024 focussed around children in our care and care leavers showed positive improvements in overall practice and management oversight; and bespoke DCS assurance built in around fostering which has demonstrated improved management oversight and regulatory compliance
- We have built in opportunities for 'dip testing' in the scope of the Child Experiences and Audit Meeting, which provides the opportunity for cross service leadership oversight of the quality of audits and practice
- A programme of cultural competency training is underway until March 2025 focused at service lead/practice supervisor level with leadership and frontline staff briefings. Feedback to date is that the training has evoked creative conversations around power and privilege and is developing confidence about the use of specific tools in supervision

and practice

- Focus on the development of voice and engagement principles to support child centred practice and recording, and session planned to reinforce the importance of voice, engagement and lived experiences at the heart of practice across the system
- The views of children in our care and care leavers was at the heart of Corporate Parenting fortnight and their views helped to shape and influence a number of events and activities
- Corporate Parenting Fortnight held including a range of activities for children, young people and the people that care for them, and key events including fostering brunch, partnership event and YOUnique awards (for which we received 130 nominations, more than double last year)
- NEL Our Voice Listen Up won a participation award via the Coram Voice: National Voice Awards for their work is resurrecting the LACE awards to become our YOUnique awards, which creates lasting memories for children in our care and care leavers, and which has now been recognised as a local annual event
- We supported Bridge Group members to visit London to engage in a direct conversation with the Children's Minister, and providing further opportunities to raise the profile of NEL and enable our young people to have positive experiences
- Safeguarding Children Partnership Celebration and Launch Event held on 9 December 2024 to celebrate the 2023/24 annual report and to launch the revised local arrangements, the Child Exploitation Strategy and Early Help Strategy, which will help to further socialise the need for ongoing partnership action

#### 5.1.2. **Help, support and protect our children, young people and families**

- Ongoing work continues to strengthen the recording of strategy discussions (in particular investigation planning and the sharpening of rational), the quality and impact of supervision (particularly following a significant/ trigger incident and following audit)
- Our approach to child led / child inclusive assessment, planning and intervention is being strengthened including the use of direct work tools to effect change and the quality and evolution of CIN / CP planning. Training to the workforce was co-designed and delivered by a young person to strengthen planning and intervention in October 2024
- The risk analysis approach has been rolled out across leaders, managers and front line practitioners (to transition from the use of safety plans to strengthening the response to risk analysis within established planning frameworks by 31 December 2024)
- There has been a sharpened focus on the workforce and partnership information sharing, identification and intervention to reduce risk to children who may be suffering sexual harm and the therapeutic

intervention available to enable their recovery (both inter familial and outside the home)

- There is a sharpened focus on the wider context and environmental and safeguarding responses for children with a disability to ensure the practice and outcomes are effective. The local short breaks offer remains a focus for development
- Family Hubs and Start for Life Programme continues to strengthen and progress has been well received from the DfE
- There has been a sharpened focus on the identification of children at risk of and experiencing child exploitation to ensure proactive and timely sharing of any information regarding locations, offenders and hotspots for disruption

#### 5.1.3. **Deliver a high quality offer for children in our care**

- The number of fostering businesses continues to grow and we now have 105 business signed up to be fostering friendly plus a further 23 schools. The number of fostering enquiries is double that of 2023/2024 and we anticipate 14 new mainstream foster carer households being approved by the end March 2025
- The new allowance model, implemented in October 2024, is supported by a comprehensive training, development and support offer, and there is greater management oversight
- Updated Regulation 24 assessment, viability and adoption decision making processes have been developed. Monitoring and oversight ensures that all approvals are compliant with regulations
- New matching processes and a revised delegated decision-making tool have been implemented which is having a positive impact on the lived experiences of children in our care
- We are exploring the Care Friends app (where foster carers can identify and put forward their friends and associates who they think would make good foster carers to help us to target people who may not otherwise consider fostering). It can also be used to circulate information and messages to carers. Further utilisation of the app may include recruitment to posts inc. social workers and children's home staff

#### 5.1.4. **Deliver a high quality offer for care leavers**

- The care leaver offer, including young people's engagement in co-producing the offer, was shared with Children and Lifelong Learning scrutiny, alongside the corporate parenting board during Corporate Parenting Fortnight. The offer was formally launched at the Corporate Parenting Partnership event on the 6 November 2024 and is now in action

- Training and development to support outcomes is being developed to support the implementation of the new local offer, and work towards improved outcomes for young people. This includes a bespoke modular programme supported by a training guide to aid reflection and learning, and further bespoke training with a focus on higher education and university for care leavers
- Protected characteristics for care leavers was considered at Full Council during corporate parenting fortnight and was unanimously passed by Full Council. We are now working alongside the leaving care workforce to develop material to spread the message to young people, and ensure that the impact of the decision is maximised
- Additional housing capacity has been created and since July 2024, we have increased capacity for care leavers 18+ who require supported housing, with 3 additional properties providing 12 additional units, amongst other accommodation acquired earlier in the year. We are also exploring other options to develop the local supported accommodation landscape

#### **5.1.5. Develop the quality of our learning and education landscape for all children**

- The relaunched whole headteacher meeting was hosted at Franklin College, with a focus on children's services improvement journey. We are moving towards a more collegiate approach within these meetings, and the two local DfE attendance hubs shared their approaches to improving attendance through a range of strategies and approaches. Locally, early indications point to an increase in attendance for the autumn term
- Mapping the destinations of each of our care leavers has been prioritised to align with the council's pledge to recognise care experienced as a protected characteristic. A number of potential employment and mentoring opportunities have been offered and will be explored as opportunities for our care leavers

### **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, week-to-week and month-to-month basis, and there is routine reporting, oversight and tracking across relevant governance and partnership arrangements, including in the context of the Continuous Improvement Board.
- 5.2.2. Key performance exceptions and highlights are included in appendix 2.

## **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

**ANN-MARIE MATSON**

**DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES**

## **APPENDIX 1: Performance exceptions and highlights**

### **Further key headlines (as at December 2024) include:**

- Average caseloads have remained consistent, and have not increased, for frontline social workers. This continues to have daily oversight, and the ongoing recruitment of more permanent social workers will continue to have a positive impact on this
- The overall timeliness of supervision continues to increase, and the large majority is held in timescales. There continues to be robust management oversight to ensure consistency, to maintain and build on compliance, and to improve quality
- Cases open to Family Help demonstrates that children are receiving help and support at the earliest point. Step ups to Social Care remain relatively low demonstrating that Family Help are able to manage the risk and only escalate cases where appropriate
- Children in need numbers have remained higher than our improvement plan target levels and the number of children on a child protection plan and children in care remains fairly static overall
- The rolling rate of initial child protection conferences held in timescales is in line with statutory neighbours, and better than other comparators, though it remains below our target levels. There remains an ongoing area of focus to ensure there are no delays to children progressing to child protection where appropriate
- The rate of child protection re-registrations in year remains better performance than our improvement plan target and better than the last published comparator data
- Visits in timescales to children in our care, children in need and children in need of protection have improved in month and there is daily oversight on this to maintain and further improve timeliness of visits