

# CHILDREN AND LIFELONG LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL

DATE	07/03/2024
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 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.

Significantly, the landscape of our SLIP support has changed in year, and at the end March 2024, there was a mutual decision for Lincolnshire to end the partnership with NELC Children's Services. This demonstrates the confidence of the DfE Commissioner and our local system leaders, who were in support of the recently appointed Children's Services Leadership Team being accountable for the improvement journey and for negotiating and facilitating SLIP activity.

Work is progressing at pace to deliver against the 2024/25 Improvement Plan, in the context of the identified priorities and ambition of the Council Plan, and there is ongoing oversight through the Transformation Meeting and Continuous Improvement Board. The Tactical Improvement Board, which was previously included in Improvement Plan governance arrangements has been stood down in recognition of the development and implementation of the children's services assurance framework.

Work is underway in preparedness for upcoming Ofsted activity, including the next Monitoring Visit, anticipated in September 2024, and the full Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services, anticipated 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 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. A DfE Commissioner was identified and Lincolnshire County Council SLIP support commenced in August 2022. The inaugural Improvement Plan was endorsed by the Continuous Improvement Board (CIB) in March 2023 (chaired by the DfE Commissioner)

- 1.3. A Tactical Improvement Board (TIB) was also established to provide additional oversight, and there was routine progress reporting against the identified priorities through the TIB and the CIB
- 1.4. A review of the progress made against the inaugural plan was undertaken and a new Improvement Plan for 2024/25 was agreed via the CIB in February 2024
- 1.5. The Tactical Improvement Board was stood down, and 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
- 1.6. The most recent Ofsted Monitoring Visit was undertaken in January 2024, with a focus on permanence. Although there have been quarterly Ofsted Monitoring Visits to date, the next one will be undertaken in September 2024, with a focus on children in need and children in need of protection. We anticipate that the next full Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services will be undertaken in 2025

## 2. RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

- 2.1. In the context of the Improvement Plan, a risk register has been developed and is routinely updated and shared via the CIB. Across the scope of the identified risks, there are mitigating actions in place which provide assurance to CIB members.
- 2.2. As we move forwards in our improvement journey, we are cognisant of the opportunities to drive forward transformational change, including, but not exhaustive:
  - **WORKFORCE:** Permanent, experienced leadership and management team now in place 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 amplified focus on supervision
  - **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 (i.e. through core and grant funding)
  - **MANAGING POPULATIONS AND DEMAND:** Refreshed practice approach and threshold document, and partners being reintegrated into the front door. Review of family help will contribute to further responding to need at the earliest point
  - **PARTNERSHIPS:** Amplified focus on how partners/partnerships can contribute to the children's system and ensuring opportunities for high challenge and high support; building on refresh of governance arrangements i.e. via CSP and further development and implementation of associated strategies i.e. neglect, CSA, CE, early help
  - **CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE REFORM:** Taking account of and responding to national and local policy drivers i.e. Working Together, Children's Social Care National Framework, Special Educational Needs / Disabilities and Alternative Provision (SENDAP) Improvement Plan etc

- **SYSTEMS AND PROCESSES:** Performance and data are key enablers and pending rationalisation of education systems, and changes to Liquidlogic will be key to managing populations and demand and ensuring effective assurance and oversight
- **CORPORATE PARENTING:** Raising awareness of corporate parenting responsibilities will contribute to the development and implementation of the corporate parenting offer and care leaver offer
- **SUFFICIENCY:** Amplified focus on the foster friendly initiative and the development of the fostering offer will contribute to the increase in foster carers; and the review of children's provision will impact on choice and will align with our values
- **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

### 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, including in the context of our amplified focus on recruitment marketing activity.
- 3.2. To minimise any reputational risk of NELC Children's Services not achieving its improvement aspirations, we are utilising the capacity identified above, and 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. This is having a demonstrable impact on recruitment activity and of the perceptions of North East Lincolnshire as a positive place to work.

### 4. FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

- 4.1. The DfE have directly awarded improvement funding to NELC, as opposed to via SLIP, which demonstrates their confidence in our capacity to manage spend associated with our improvement priorities.
- 4.2. The financial envelope associated with Children's Services remains a significant impact 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, albeit reducing, and most significantly the cost of external placements. However, there are early indications that the amplified and renewed approach to our priority areas of focus is having a positive impact on the budget trajectories, in the context of investing to save. We are also providing high challenge and high support across key partners to ensure they are consistently and comparatively contributing to the local children's agenda.
- 4.3. 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.

## **5. CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IMPLICATIONS**

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

#### **5.1.1. Vision, Culture and Strategy**

- Discussions held with systems leaders around partnership governance and connectivity, and agreement in principle to develop a single children's strategy, which will ensure clarity of strategic intent across the children's agenda
- Ongoing focus on embedding the 'family feel, family first' culture, and utilising a range of opportunities to test out as to whether we are living our values i.e. at leadership and management forum, staff engagement session(s), workforce inspection preparedness sessions and through routine meetings and practice, which are demonstrating that this is becoming more embedded
- A leadership and management session, focussing on relational practice, has been facilitated by a renowned national leader in this field. This will be the first of a programme of sessions with the team and the wider workforce, including partners

#### **5.1.2. Assurance Framework**

- Ongoing development and roll out of the audit programme, which has leadership and management oversight via the Child Experiences and Audit Meeting (CEAM)
- A Children's Services Audit Toolkit developed and shared across the leadership team which provides practitioners with relevant resources to enhance their audit practice
- Established DCS Thematic Focus Meetings which are an opportunity for senior leaders to come together to reflect on current practice, dip sample children's cases and consider areas of strength and areas for development which are being utilised to shape and influence practice improvements
- SLT attended the Audit Working Group on 13 June 2024 to represent the enhanced Children's Services governance arrangements which demonstrated the progress made to strengthen oversight and assurance at all levels and across the whole system
- Scheme of delegations has been reviewed to ensure that staff with the right level of experience and accountability make the right decisions at the right time for children we are responsible for
- Amplified focus on refreshing the CS strategic and operational risk arrangements (improvement plan risk register to feature in revised arrangements)

#### **5.1.3. Voice and Engagement**

- Feedback from young people is being used to develop resources which will help to improve practice. Children's Services Leadership Team regularly attend Our Voice Listen Up to engage with children and young people in our care, most recently in June 2024, during which they consulted on what makes a good worker and the importance of transitions from one worker to another. A 'how to' guide will be developed and shared with CEAM ahead of wider distribution

- Children's Services Leadership Team also engaged in a recent Care Leavers Drop In, at which care leavers in attendance were supported to share their views and experiences, the outcomes of which have been fed into the development of the care leaver offer. The session also reinforced the care, love and support to our care leavers from our staff group
- Led by the events committee and underpinning working groups, work is underway to plan and co-ordinate events and activities, including but not exhaustive summer health event(s) for children in need and children in need of protection, children in our care and care leavers and Corporate Parenting fortnight
- There is an ongoing commitment for young people to be involved in recruitment processes and collaborative work is ongoing to develop a 'young people in recruitment' toolkit. One young person was recently involved in a film with one of the Deputy Service Directors to reinforce the importance of what a good social worker looks like. Another young person was also involved in a film to emphasise the importance of direct work
- We have facilitated one of our young people in our care to engage in a community project, which will include a visit to America in the summer
- We have celebrated the achievements of our children and young people with SEND and people who support them at the recent SEND awards, which was attended by circa 150 people, and which was extremely well received. This event also featured the launch of the SENDAP strategies

#### 5.1.4. **Safeguarding Children Partnership**

- We have reviewed and refreshed the partnership governance arrangements, including the reconfiguration of the Safeguarding Children Partnership (SCP) Board, which is now chaired by the DCS as one of the three safeguarding partners. This supersedes the previous independent chair arrangement in line with Working Together 2023. Underpinning sub groups have also been established and are being chaired by system leaders across the partnership
- We have developed the role of independent scrutiny officers to provide us with capacity to ensure independent oversight of our local arrangements. The scrutiny and assurance framework has been revised and programme of scrutiny and assurance in place
- There has been significant progress made in the development of the SCP dashboard, which was presented at the June 2024 SCP Board, and further opportunities for data development have been identified
- We developed and distributed a new iteration of the SCP newsletter which is a mechanism for sharing information and communications across the partnership
- The Helping, Supporting and Protecting Children and Young People in North East Lincolnshire, the Child Sexual Abuse and Neglect strategies were launched in June 2024, and there is a further focusing on developing our strategic intent in relation to child exploitation

#### 5.1.5. **Partnerships and Boards**

- We have rearticulated the children's partnership arrangements to provide further clarity and to strengthen opportunities to ensure a focus on the children's agenda and to create the opportunities for high challenge and high support
- Meeting held with systems leader to focus on partnership governance and connectivity. Agreement to review Health and Wellbeing Board (HWBB) terms of reference and reporting arrangements and to review the Health and Wellbeing Strategy and to ensure appropriate representation of the children's agenda
- Agreement for the Special Educational Need / Disabilities and Alternative Provision (SENDAP) Partnership Board to report directly to the HWBB and interface with the CYP Strategic Partnership Board. The new SENDAP Partnership Board will be scheduled early September 2024 and then quarterly thereafter
- The Youth Partnership Board chair has agreed continue his term as chair and we have further strengthened the interface between the board and the NELC Chief Executive. The Youth Justice Plan has been submitted to the Youth Justice Board, and we have been informed we are moving into quadrant 1, which is very positive, and we are anticipating a visit from the Youth Justice Board in August 2024

#### 5.1.6. **Inspection preparedness**

- Ongoing amplified focus to ensure preparedness for upcoming monitoring visit (MV) to ensure we are in the best position to present our best selves at the point of notification, and to evidence local practice, partnership working and outcomes for children. This includes refresh of action plan, document bank and storyboards
- Workforce sessions have also been scheduled to support the workforce in their preparedness for inspection. These are being led by Deputy Services Directors
- Similar preparation is also underway for the ILACS which is anticipated in 2025, and there is also an ongoing focus on wider inspection arrangements and preparedness, particularly SEND and youth justice, but also Joint Targeted Area Inspections, as well as an ongoing focus on regulatory compliance and inspection readiness in relation to Children's Homes and Supported Accommodation

#### 5.1.7. **Supervision**

- New management team now in place to drive forward the quality of supervision and to challenge practice
- Supervision policy has been refreshed and relaunched with the workforce and quality standards of what good looks like have also been developed and shared
- More recent supervisions reflect the progress for children and the development of the workforce, which is also evident via independent scrutiny activity, dip sampling and audit activity. This remains an area of ongoing focus reflecting the importance of supervision on the quality of practice and planning for children

- A program of workshops delivered by one of our SLIP delivery partners have commenced and continue with live reflective sessions to shape practice. Another SLIP delivery partner is in place to coach and mentor Service Leads and Practice Supervisors to shape and enhance the quality and impact of practice

#### 5.1.8. **Integrated Front Door**

- The Front Door Policy and Procedures have been refreshed and relaunched across the workforce, and the systems and workflow was streamlined in March 2024 to create efficiencies and to ensure timeliness and quality of decision making
- Information sharing agreement and PITSTOP have been refreshed and relaunched across the partnership which is enabling more timely interventions at the earliest point
- Partners were reintegrated in the Integrated Front Door from May 2024 and plans to include Education too, which will build on the strong relationships already in place, and enhance the timeliness and quality of decision making
- A Front Door Health Check was undertaken in March 2024 by regional sector led improvement leads, which demonstrated the strength of recent progress. A further review will be undertaken in October 2024 to reflect on further progress and practice improvements
- Partnership interface meetings have been established to jointly explore themes and trends for children and partner auditing has been established to reflect on the impact of the partnership for children

#### 5.1.9. **Meeting need at the earliest point**

- There is greater connectivity between family help and the wider system for children which means that capacity is maximised, there is reduction in duplication and avoidance of referring on culture
- Workshops have been held to support the workforce on what good plans and intervention looks like
- Focussed auditing and assurance activity, including via SLIP delivery partners, has been undertaken in relation to children on a child protection plan, public law outline and private law, which demonstrates some positive practice, as well as further areas for development which are being tracked to completion
- Meeting held with Judges and president of the Local Family Justice Board where progress with children in proceedings/new proceedings starting was highlighted
- CASS Health Check was undertaken in April / May 2024 which was a combination of connectivity and developmental work with staff and dip samples of key areas of practice
- Workshops were held in June 2024 to strengthen the quality and impact of strategy discussions
- There is a sharpened focus on the identification of child exploitation and the Multi Agency Child Exploitation (MACE) meeting has been refreshed to provide a sharpened focus on the oversight of children at risk of, or experiencing child exploitation, and to ensure collaborative partnership action

#### 5.1.10. **Family help and intervention**

- A review has taken place of all open family help cases which has identified a number of children who could be supported at a lower level and a targeted piece of work is being completed to step these cases down or close swiftly
- Plans are in place to ensure a continued focus on the recording of the evidence base of the impact of our intervention with children and families in line with payment by results. We have submitted 106 claims which is above our projected target of 78 and more than that total 2023/24 submission
- Work is underway to strengthen the data reporting and information systems
- Greater connectivity being built across the system for children to ensure one seamless offer for families i.e. Impact of intervention and voice and experience is a focus in CEAM
- NEL have been successful in a bid to be one of only four Local Authorities to participate in a pilot of the DfE's Family Hubs Digital Solutions - Connect, Manage and Find

#### 5.1.11. **Permanence**

- Permanence tracker is in place and being utilised enabling children's plans and any delays to be addressed, improving planning and permanence
- Progress is being made in agreeing long-term matches for a number of children where this has been delayed. All will be complete by August ensuring children achieve stability and permanence
- Further work is being undertaken on the care plan for all children in care to ensure that the recorded plans accurately reflect the child's current plan. All cases are being scrutinised and updated

#### 5.1.12. **Care leavers**

- Young people are involved in the development of the offer and it will ensure that there is fair and equitable support to all young people including improved housing, a clear financial offer and framework, support and progression of Pathway Planning with a partnership focus
- This work will also feed into the Corporate Parenting Champions group, which is accountable to the Corporate Parenting Board

#### 5.1.13. **Review and restructure**

- As a result of the review and restructure, there is now a permanent leadership and management team in place across children's social care including Service Directors, Deputy Service Directors, Service Leads, Practice Supervisors and other specialist roles
- There is a noticeable impact of the new management structure already with improved morale across the service, improvements noted in case audit and better decision making / supervision for staff. Continued monitoring of children's outcomes will review this progress and the impact made



- There has also been an ongoing focus on developing social work capacity and as part of the recent recruitment, there has been a number of candidates wanting to convert from agency to permanent
- Plans are underway to review roles and functions across family help, and there are other developments across fostering and leaving care, and proposals are being developed in relation to children's homes
- Additional capacity in specific functional areas is being developed to deliver against our priorities i.e. in relation to SLIP improvement support, communications, participation and policy development which will further contribute to developing the infrastructure to support a safe system

#### 5.1.14. **Workforce**

- Inaugural Workforce Board held on 7 May 2024, and Workforce Strategy and underpinning delivery plan are now in place and are being overseen by the Principal Social Worker and Workforce Lead
- There has been a sharpened focus on raising the profile of North East Lincolnshire across all social media platforms and creating the excitement and purpose for people wanting to join the workforce. This is being supported by our partnership with Community Care who are promoting NELC as a place to work and live
- There has been a 1000% increase in successful qualified social worker appointments over the last six months
- Connectivity and workforce engagement sessions with the workforce have been developed to create the conditions for practice to flourish
- The Children's Services workforce have now moved to New Oxford House which has strengthened the connectivity and live support, as well as positively contributing to our 'family first family feel' culture
- We continue to develop our relationship with universities to attract final students to NELC with the package and offer of support

#### 5.1.15. **Corporate Parenting**

- Building on the outcomes of the Corporate Parenting Self-Assessment, we have made progress in the development of underpinning sub group arrangements, and anticipate an enhanced level of reporting at the upcoming Corporate Parenting Board meeting
- It has been agreed that the board will be co-chaired by an elected member and young person
- We have appointed a corporate parenting coordinator, which will add further value to the development of the corporate parenting offer
- Ongoing amplified focus on raising awareness of corporate parenting across Children's Services, the Council and the wider partnership. Significant interest, buy in and offers of support and meeting(s) pending to co-ordinate the offers and arrangements (corporate parenting champions)
- Corporate Parenting Champions Induction session held on 8 May 2024 for champions across the Council. Champions will also be sought from partners and the scope of the Corporate Parenting Champions Group will be extended from NELC to across the partnership
- Plans are in development for Care Leavers Week and Corporate Parenting Week in October / November 2024

#### **5.1.16. Sufficiency**

- Improved stability is being evidenced across both homes and foster care. Draft Sufficiency Strategy has now completed its engagement stage with a view to being presented to the Corporate Parenting Board for approval in August 2024. It will be presented to the Scrutiny panel in July 2024 then progress to Cabinet
- A monthly report will be fed into the Sufficiency Group which will ensure that we have continuous oversight of our placement sufficiency and provide the required support and challenge to ensure resources and efforts continue to deliver the required changes in North East Lincolnshire
- Regular information will be presented to relevant boards and partnerships, including the Corporate Parenting Board, with an annual strategy refresh to ensure that our targets and milestones for delivery remain focussed
- Training in the homes by Changing Minds, Changing Lives has commenced and is being positively received by the staff in the homes. Further planning is underway regarding long-term training model across the homes in liaison with Navigo

#### **5.1.17. Fostering**

- There has been significant focus on raising the profile of fostering across North East Lincolnshire, including Fostering Fortnight, attendance at the recent carnival, presence on LinkedIn and a range of meetings, events and community awareness
- NELC have recommitted to being Fostering Friendly employer and as a result of SLT engagement with Grimsby Town Football Club to launch them being the first Fostering Friendly business in North East Lincolnshire. Further to this, a number of businesses have now signed up to be foster friendly and work is also underway to develop a Fostering Ambassador scheme to encourage and support high profile / community leaders to fly the flag of fostering in North East Lincolnshire
- New allowance model proposals have been completed and engagement has taken place with carers in relation to different proposed models. The proposals are now going through the relevant governance and democratic arrangements for approval
- Updated Fostering Offer to all our foster carers (in consultation with carers), which is supported via the foster carer recruitment strategy which has been refreshed
- Feedback from foster carers is very positive. They are stating that they feel valued and recognise that they are receiving better support, their needs are high on the agenda and the clarity of decision making
- Significantly, the number of fostering enquiries has increased

### **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 Transformation Meeting and Continuous Improvement Board. There has been some progress in relation to key measures which demonstrates progress in relation to systems, processes and compliance, though there also remains a focus on improving quality of practice. Key headlines include:

- 5.2.1.1. 565 cases were open to Targeted Family Help with a further 635 cases open to partners
- 5.2.1.2. Demand to the Integrated Front Door has continued to reduce over the first quarter of 2024-25 with 845 contacts received and 161 referrals during June 2024
- 5.2.1.3. The number of cases open to social care services has remained fairly static over the Q1 of 2024-25 with 1847 open cases equivalent to a rate of 558 per 10,000
- 5.2.1.4. 96% of all assessments were completed within statutory timescales in June 2024 which continues the high performance seen for assessment timeliness during the last 6 months
- 5.2.1.5. 74% of initial child protection conferences were held in timescales during 2024-25. This has reduced over the last month and is an area of focus to ensure there are no delays to children progressing to child protection
- 5.2.1.6. Children in need numbers have remained higher than our improvement plan target levels, mainly due to cases stepping down to children in need from child protection and children in our care as well as some challenges around moving cases through the system. There is a renewed focus on throughput within the teams
- 5.2.1.7. Children subject to a child protection plan continues to reduce and as at end of June 2024 there were 166 children on a child protection plan, equivalent to a rate of 50 per 10,000. This is now below stat neighbours and is nearing the regional average of 49 per 10,000
- 5.2.1.8. 442 children were in our care as at end of June 2024. Numbers have continued to decrease steadily and safely, and we continue to see much lower numbers of children entering care each month. Only 2 children entered care in June 2024, both of which were unaccompanied asylum seekers. 13 children exited care in June 2024, all of which left care with either an adoption, Special Guardianship or child arrangement order, returned home or turned 18
- 5.2.1.9. Visits to children in our care in timescales remain consistently high, though there are some challenges around child protection visits due to 87% of visits being in timescales at month end. There is largely due to recording issues with the majority of children seen but their visit not recorded. There is daily oversight on this
- 5.2.1.10. Current average caseloads for frontline social workers is 22, which has increased over the last month as some agency staff have left. Highest caseload is 31 for one worker

5.2.1.11. Supervisions remain consistently high during Q1 of 2024-25  
with all teams above 90%

## **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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