

CHILDREN AND LIFELONG LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL

DATE	01/10/2024
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, we have finalised our Self Evaluation of the Experiences of Children in Need of Help and Protection, Children in Our Care and Care Leavers 2023/24 (SEF), which demonstrated the progress and impact.

We have continued to lead our SLIP programme, and we have strengthened our governance arrangements to ensure we orientate their workstreams and capacity to provide the impact and added value intended. This is being supported through additional capacity to ensure a co-ordinated response.

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 Continuous Improvement Board (CIB). As a result of our self-evaluation and the outcomes of the monitoring visit, we are undertaking a mid-way review of our improvement plan, which will be shared and reported on through relevant partnership and governance arrangements.

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. A review of the progress made was undertaken and a new Improvement Plan for 2024/25 was agreed via the Continuous Improvement Board (CIB) in February 2024
- 1.2. 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

1.3. The most recent Ofsted Monitoring Visit was undertaken in September 2024, with a focus on children in need and children in need of protection. Initial feedback from Ofsted recognised the progress being made on improving the experiences of, and creating change for, our children and families in the borough. The monitoring visit letter will be provided on 15 October 2024.

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. Any identified risks have mitigating actions in place which provide assurance to CIB members.

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 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 (including through core and grant funding)
- **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:** Amplified focus on the foster friendly initiative and the development of the fostering offer to value and increase the number of foster carers
- **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 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. 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 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

5.1.1. Vision, Culture and Strategy

- There is an ongoing focus on developing the workforce so we are all 'living' our practice approach, through a focus on being relational, strengths based and solution focussed
- System leaders across the partnership have agreed to develop an umbrella partnership strategy across the scope of children, young people and families. A multi-agency working group and core group have been established to focus on the development of the strategy, commencing in September 2024, and it is intended that an event will be scheduled in 2025
- Following on from the leadership and management session in July 2024, which focused on relational practice, we have developed a further programme, which will involve around 160 front line practitioners across children's social care, in the first instance and further discussions are pending to consider how the programme can be further developed across the workforce

5.1.2. Assurance Framework

- Through ongoing listening, learning, reviewing and adapting across our Children's Services Assurance Framework, there is a robust leadership and management grip, at all levels, in relation to our performance, our progress and our areas for further development, which has been demonstrated in our self-evaluation

5.1.3. Voice and Engagement

- There are more opportunities for the views and lived experiences of children, young people and families to shape and influence partnership action through an amplified focus on voice and engagement at key boards and partnerships. Feedback from young people is being used to develop resources, which will help to shape and influence day to day practice
- We have finalised the Your Voice Matters Children and Young People's Voice and Engagement Annual Report 2023/24, which demonstrates our commitment to listening to and taking account of the views and lived experiences of children, young people and families from diverse community and backgrounds. It articulates an overview of activity, highlights some of their important issues, what has happened and what difference it is making
- There has been a focussed discussion, through the CYP Strategic Partnership Board, to consider what children, young people and families (CYPF) have shared about their experiences of services and settings, how things might be improved and what was positive. It was agreed that there would be a task and finish group to further explore how we might collate and utilise outcomes of voice and engagement activity to shape and influence partnership action, and that this could be aligned to the work being undertaken to develop a CYPF umbrella strategy
- We held two bespoke summer events, one for children in our care, care leavers and the people that support them, and the other for children in need and children in need of protection and their families. There was positive feedback about the activities and information at the event, with one child saying 'it was the best fun he'd ever had'. Feedback and emerging themes from the event, and 'what next' have been shared with key officers, and through appropriate partnership and governance arrangements
- There was a bespoke item from the Young People's Advisory Group (YPAG) at the SENDAP Partnership Board in August 2024, at which recent YPAG activity, impact and outcomes were shared with board members. There is to be further exploration as to how young people can directly engage in the board, and opportunities for collaborative workstreams are being progressed

- Taking account of the outcomes of consultation with young people through Our Voice Listen Up, we have developed the first of a series of 'How to' guides, is around how to speak to children and young people about their changes to their social worker. As part of this, we are also developing a 'stamp' to denote when documents have been co-produced with children and young people

5.1.4. **Safeguarding Children Partnership**

- We continue to strengthen the arrangements across our Safeguarding Children Partnership, and there are examples of positive partnership practice and of working creatively with children and families to best meet their needs
- The Safeguarding Children Partnership Board (SCPB) took place in September 2024 with a widened membership including Public Health, Navigo and NLAG, along with statutory delegated safeguarding partners, and representatives from their respective organisations. Membership was also extended to the Probation Service, though they were unable to attend on this occasion
- There has been significant progress to collaboratively develop key governance and strategy documents. The publication of the Local Arrangements ensures our compliance with Working Together 2023 to publish by the end December 2024
- Through working group arrangements, there has been and will continue to be an amplified focus on developing and implementing the delivery plans associated with the key partnership strategies around the SCP priority areas of focus

5.1.5. **Partnerships and Boards**

- There has been and will continue to be an amplified focus on ensuring key boards and partnerships are in place and that they are being utilised, in the context of high support and high challenge, to shape and influence the children's agenda, and that they are contributing to our improvement journey
- Where the children's agenda is the primary focus, there are clear governance and reporting arrangements in place, with underpinning strategies and delivery plans and workstreams in place

5.1.6. **Integrated Front Door**

- Children and families needs are being met through ongoing continued improvement in the timeliness and quality of information sharing, and multi-agency decision making at the Integrated Front Door
- Whiteboards have been introduced at the Integrated Front Door which ensures that information is easily available and accessible and is contributing to more timely decision making.

- Building on children's social care, police and health representation at the Integrated Front Door, work is progressing to recruit a bespoke education officer to contribute to the arrangements (and to further strengthen the positive relationships with education that are already in place)
- Following the Front Door Health Check in March 2024, arrangements are progressing to welcome a review visit which will take place where there will be the opportunity for regional sector led partners to explore the impact of the embedded developments and QA methods

5.1.7. **Family help and intervention**

- Through a programme of summer events in all 7 family hubs, there has been a significant focus on promoting the family hubs offer across the community
- Greater connectivity between family help and the wider system for children means that capacity is maximised and there is a reduction in duplication, avoiding a 'referring on' culture for children but recognising this is in its infancy
- The community offer to meet need locally for children and families has been strengthened with the family hubs offer
- The evidenced progress in turning families around is demonstrated through higher payments by results claims

5.1.8. **Permanence**

- There continues to be a focus on ensuring the timeliness of permanence plans for our children and young people, which is being supported by a review of care plans to ensure they reflect the child's current plan
- There is focussed activity on developing the quality of children in care planning and practice and quality, which is being supported by audit activity and a planned programme of work

5.1.9. **Care leavers**

- A full review and refresh of the local offer to care leavers has been undertaken and is being shared across relevant partnership, governance and democratic arrangements.
- Young people have been involved in the development of the offer which will ensure 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
- The care leaver offer will be formally endorsed at the Corporate Parenting Board in October 2024 and will be 'launched' at the Corporate Parenting Partnership Event on 6 November 2024

- A further full partnership review and refresh of the offer has commenced with discussions with colleagues in the ICB/Navigo with a view to launching the full, comprehensive revised integrated offer during care leavers week
- An extraordinary full Council meeting will take place during Corporate Parenting Fortnight to consider the recommendation that the Council adopts care experience as a protected characteristic

5.1.10. **Review and restructure**

- There is a noticeable impact of the new leadership and management structure already with improved morale across the service, and demonstrable improvements in relation to decision making, assurance, supervision and the quality and timeliness of intervention and planning – which is being evidenced through the assurance framework and via the recent Ofsted monitoring visit. Continued monitoring of children's outcomes will review this progress and the impact made

5.1.11. **Workforce**

- There continues to be a focus on raising the profile of NEL across all social media platforms and creating the excitement and purpose for people wanting to join TeamNEL
- We have developed and distributed the direct work toolkit to support children and families with a diverse range of communication needs, and rolled out the first three in a series of practice guides in relation to continuous professional development, what good looks like and case recording
- We have further developed and rolling out the Children's Services 'foundations for practice' induction programme for all new starters and existing staff
- Raising awareness of NEL being a positive place to live and work which is having a positive impact on recruitment, not least that since January 2024, we have recruited 20 permanent Social Workers (compared with none since the international social workers in 2022). We also welcomed more social work apprentices in September 2024, who have commenced their induction programme

5.1.12. **Corporate Parenting**

- The Children's Assurance Partnerships and Evaluation (CAPE) Team have taken on the support arrangements for the Corporate Parenting Board and the scope of meetings, which will now be held quarterly, have been refreshed to encourage young people and wider partnership engagement
- The reconfiguration of the Corporate Parenting Board, and underpinning governance and reporting arrangements, provides the foundations to further develop and deliver of the corporate parenting strategy and underpinning offer

- There have been significant developments in the programme for the upcoming Corporate Parenting Fortnight which is taking place between 28 October and 8 November 2024. Key events include:
 - Arts and Craft sessions
 - Bake Off
 - Voice Listen Up
 - Fostering Friendly Business Brunch
 - Lego and Board Games session
 - leavers drop in
 - Kick About Challenge
 - Halloween Fancy Dress Disco Party
 - Care leavers Sunday Lunch drop in
 - Deer Walk
 - Steady Come Dine with Me at Children's Homes
 - Video Games Group
 - Corporate Parenting Partnership Event in the Assembly Room at Grimsby Town Hall
 - Prize Bingo
 - YOUUnique Awards for children in care and care leavers
- The collaborative approach to the co-ordination of Corporate Parenting Fortnight and the events and activities themselves provide further opportunities to develop relationships and to promote corporate parenting responsibilities and the corporate parenting offer across the partnership and to children and young people in our care, care leavers and the people who support them
- The NELC Chief Executive has taken on a key role in the Corporate Parenting Champions Group and there are plans underway to develop the scope across the partnership

5.1.13. **Sufficiency**

- Improved stability is being evidenced across children's homes and foster care
- A monthly report is being fed into the Sufficiency Group which is helping to ensure we have continuous oversight of our placement sufficiency and to provide the required support and challenge to ensure resources and efforts continue to deliver the required changes in North East Lincolnshire

5.1.14. **Fostering**

- Two fostering recruitment officers have been recruited to continue our focus on recruiting and retaining local foster carers, and there continues to be a significant focus on raising the profile of fostering across North East Lincolnshire via community awareness and engagement in meetings and events, and via our LinkedIn presence
- As a result of community awareness, there are now 35 businesses / organisations who are now fostering friendly and examples of their offer to foster carers includes:

- Concessionary rates / free consultation(s) / free treatment / free membership
- Raising awareness on social media and through marketing within business setting(s)
- Agreed to policy changes
- Sponsorship and discounted goods for events / awards

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 Transformation Meeting and Continuous Improvement Board.

5.2.2. Key performance exceptions and highlights are included in appendix 1.

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

In North East Lincolnshire, children and young people are more likely to:

- be supported by permanent staff
- receive support early and be less likely to need a statutory service
- remaining living within their own family and community

(than in 2021/22 and January 2024)

	Where we were (2021/22)	Where we were (January 2024)	Where we are now (August 2024)
% front line practitioners who are permanent	25%	69%	75%
Unallocated cases	166	0	0
Average caseloads (and highest)	26 (49)	20 (30)	21 (30)
Numbers of contacts to the IFD per month	1852	1448	814
Numbers of referrals per month	291	220	169
Re-referrals %	29%	27%	21%
Assessment timeliness %	68%	89%	93%
Numbers of children in need	2415	1857	1843
Numbers of children on a child protection plan	353	269	160
Numbers of children in care	629	505	433

Further key headlines (as at August 2024) include:

- Average caseloads has remained at 21 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
- Supervision in timescales remain consistently high with 97% compliance overall, and there is robust management oversight to maintain and build on compliance and to improve quality

- 592 cases were open to targeted Family Help with a further 649 cases open to partners, which 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
- The number of cases open to social care services has decreased very slightly, but generally remained fairly static in Q2 2024-25. 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. There is a focus on throughput following successful intervention within the teams
- There has been a continued reduction in the number of contacts received at the front door, while referrals received in August 2024 are in line with last month. The timeliness of contacts to referrals has increased and remains an area of focus
- The rolling rate of initial child protection conferences held in timescales has improved and is above last years outturn and in line with statutory neighbours. This remains an area of focus to ensure there are no delays to children progressing to child protection
- There were no re-registrations in August 2024 and the in year rate of child protection re-registrations has decreased to below comparators
- The number of children in our care has continued to decrease steadily and safely, and we continue to see much lower numbers of children entering care each month.
- Visits to children in our care in timescales remain consistently high, and there have been improvements in the timeliness of visits to children in need and children in need of protection. There is daily oversight on this