

# CHILDREN AND LIFELONG LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL

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| <b>DATE</b>      | 31/07/2025                                          |
| <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

In the context of stronger communities, nurturing our children and building their future is one of the core priorities within the refreshed 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), we have continued to make progress in the context of our improvement and transformation journey.

We were notified of our Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) on 7 July 2025, which will take place until 25 July 2025. The inspection will take account of our improvement journey since the previous full inspection in 2021. As part of inspection preparedness, we collated a document bank, including a self-evaluation of the experiences of children in need of help and protection, children in our care and care leavers, along with leadership and management and education and inclusion.

The self-evaluation demonstrated ongoing progress against the key areas of focus within our improvement plan, and the wider transformation activity across Children's Services and the wider children's system.

At the end of the ILACS inspection, there will be informal feedback, though following a period of quality assurance, the outcomes of the ILACS inspection will be embargoed until the report is published on 3 September 2025, after which it will be shared through relevant governance and reporting arrangements as appropriate.

## MATTERS FOR CONSIDERATION

This report seeks to update scrutiny panel members on the key headlines of our self - assessment including key performance comparators, which demonstrates the progress made in relation to our improvement and transformation journey.

### 1. BACKGROUND AND ISSUES

- 1.1. Following the 2021 Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services in which we were judged to be inadequate across all areas, there has been a significant improvement and transformation journey, which particularly gathered momentum and pace following the recruitment of a permanent leadership and management team in 2023/24. New SLIP arrangements were enacted from the end March 2024, which demonstrated confidence in the NELC leadership and management team's capacity to take responsibility for the improvement plan, and to oversee and co-ordinate sector led improvement partner arrangements.

## **2. RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES**

- 2.1. Led through the Continuous Improvement Board, chaired by the DfE Commissioner, and through the Council's risk management arrangements, and the Children's Services assurance framework, there has been an ongoing focus on identifying and taking mitigating actions pertaining our key risk and areas of challenge.
- 2.2. As we move forwards in our improvement and transformation journey, there continues to be opportunities to drive forward further change, innovation and developments which positively impact on our workforce, our practice and on the lived experiences and outcomes for our children, young people and families.
- 2.3. We continue to take account of national policy drivers, including the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, and associated funding streams. There are opportunities to further build on our transformation activity to date, and to further develop our arrangements to respond to the areas of focus, including but not limited to family network decision making, multi-disciplinary family help and multi-agency child protection teams

## **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 including via social media channels; and there is an ongoing focus on further building relationships with key partners, agencies and organisations across the place of North East Lincolnshire. This is having a demonstrable positive impact on our culture, public perceptions and 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. We have also drawn down other prevention grant transformation funding associated with the national reforms (in the context of the Families First Partnership Programme)
- 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**

Taking account of self-assessment of the experiences of children in need of help and protection, children in our care and care leavers, we have identified a number of key areas of focus around our strategic objectives. This next section draws out some of the key highlights, as at end June 2025, unless otherwise stated:

## 5.1. Leadership and management

We have:

- Established Children's Services as the Council's number 1 priority, including adopting protected characteristics for care experienced people
- Transformed our strategic framework, including key strategies, partnership and governance arrangements across the scope of the children, young people and families system enabling more ambitious system leadership and oversight (relating to early help, child exploitation, neglect, child sexual abuse, community and corporate parenting, employability, SEND, youth justice, domestic abuse, health and wellbeing, community safety.....)
- Transformed the assurance framework and mechanisms for scrutiny of practice, supervision and management oversight at all levels (underpinned by strengthened data / performance, voice and practice wisdom). This has led to accurate self-assessments as a recurring discipline and much stronger regulatory compliance
- Reset and embedded an audit framework, underpinned by practice standards, and established routine mechanisms for leadership and management oversight, and dissemination of learning
- Raised the profile of and strengthened our Corporate and Community Parenting arrangements across the partnership including dedicated coordinator role, corporate parenting fortnight, refreshed promise, new board arrangements and partnership leading key areas
- Transformed the Safeguarding Children Partnership local arrangements, including associated functions
- Reset the managing allegation process, which has been supported through additional capacity, and provides the operating environment for high support and high challenge across the partnership
- Challenged partnership ownership to children in our care from a system leadership perspective, which has resulted in strengthened partner engagement, and a significantly improved financial contribution from Health to children living in external placements
- Committed to, invested in and engaged in a plethora of external scrutiny, assurance and sector led improvement activity across the scope of the system
- Listened to and took account of the views and experiences of our children, young people and families, leading to improved outcomes

## 5.2. Help and protection

We have:

- Strengthened our family hub offer, including family hubs, which means that children are more likely to receive help early and prevented from statutory intervention
- Re-integrated our statutory partners into the Integrated Front Door and legal services back into the Legal Tracking and Support Panel
- Strengthened leadership and management oversight, developed the Children's Experience and Audit Meeting, along with Family Help, Front Door, Child in Need and Child Protection assurance meetings and observations of practice
- Strengthened the closure and step-down process to enable a seamless offer of help at the right level
- Reduced the timescales of children subject to public proceedings

- Raised the importance of direct work which has enabled change to be affected, injected some fun as part of planning, intervention and reviewing, and built stronger relationships with children
- Strengthened our offer for young carers that is focussing on their needs and the impact of their caring responsibilities
- Effectively identified and responded to risk and need in a timely way, supported by a new risk analysis framework
- Ensured that supervision is more reflective and directive to enable more positive outcomes for children
- Equipped our more stable workforce with the tools to undertake meaningful direct work which enables a more relational approach that improves outcomes for children
- Ensured that as a partnership, we are better able to identify, disrupt and reduce the risk of harm through exploitation for our children and young people
- Relaunched independent return home interviews as missing catch ups, and strengthened our oversight, which has resulted in more children being supported following being missing and preventing risks from further missing reports

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

We have:

- Transformed the offer and support for children in our care receive through:
  - increasing the established capacity in the children in care case management team by 5 Social Workers and in the fostering teams
  - strengthened management oversight including a stronger Independent Reviewing Officer service, dedicated assurance meetings and a Delegated Decision making tool
- Ensured that children have a timely permanence plan that is overseen and tracked, with oversight by consistent managers meaning there is significant improvement in planning enabling more children to achieve permanence and better oversight of externally commissioned provision
- Long-term matched children to their foster carers enabling them to have improved stability
- Created a more stable, permanent where children benefit from having the same Social Worker with double the number of children having no Social Worker changes during the year
- Improved adoption performance in relation to the average length of time between entering care and obtaining a Placement Order
- Reduced the number of children in our care who committed offences
- Developed additional CAMHS capacity which has resulted in a reduction of the average waiting time for an assessment and intervention

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

We have:

- Co-produced with care experienced young people and launched a transformed, revised local offer to care leavers, including clearer and consistent financial support
- Worked with partners to develop the offer to care experienced people including free prescriptions and a dedicated prioritisation route to mental health services for care leavers

- Invested substantially in the leaving care team, included a 50% increase in the number of Personal Advisors, to ensure that care leavers are getting the support they need
- Undertaken a significant programme of training and development with the Leaving Care staffing team to build and improve practice
- Developed a Care Leavers Employability Strategy to clarify and drive forward our partnership ambition to enhance employment opportunities for our young people
- Launched a Council-led summer employability programme targeting care leavers currently NEET with new opportunities, which will be further developed through the formal launch of a North East Lincolnshire Family Enterprise project
- Supported more care leavers to take up education, employment or training opportunities
- Revised systems and processes to enable us to better track all care leavers, including those over 21, and we have also reviewed our over 21 cohort, and reallocated personal advisors depending on their views and need
- Ensured that care leavers receive consistent support, timely visits and contact, including those aged 21+ in line with their needs, and our former relevant young people aged 21+ who do not wish or require services
- Revised our offer to support young people in custody, guaranteeing that all young people in custody will always have an allocated personal advisor until 25, even where they have previously opted not to have a personal advisor

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

We have:

- Enhanced the Virtual School arrangements through increased leadership capacity, a new education data system to improve real time reporting of attendance exclusions and part-time timetables, and an increased training offer
- Recruited additional officer roles in the Virtual School and EHCP Co-ordinator Team to strengthen the focus and oversight of children with both an EHCP and a social worker to ensure clear oversight of those children who may be awaiting a specialist school place, with an additional teaching offer from the Learning Entitlement Outreach Team as a contingency offer during this time
- Invested in the educational psychology team, who work closely with the Virtual School to focus on approaches to support the educational outcomes of children in our care
- Developed a Systems Leaders Group with a focus on area priorities alongside the revamp of the headteachers meetings
- Committed to increased capacity for children electively home educated, and implementing a communication plan, and developing a new strategy to be launched in the autumn
- Set SMART PEP targets for the children in our care which are ambitious about outcomes, plan for our children's next steps and demonstrate the impact of education interventions
- Improved attendance across NEL, including for children on a child protection plan and for the children in our care, which supports them to increase their academic outcomes and sense of inclusion and belonging in their mainstream schools. The Virtual School has also employed an education welfare officer to monitor the attendance of children in our care both locally and out of area to bring attendance in line with the national average

## 5.6. Children's Social Care performance update

- 5.6.1. Overall, children and young people are more likely to:
- be listened to, their views taken account of and have their needs met
  - be supported by permanent staff with less changes in worker
  - receive support early from across the system and be less likely to need a statutory service
  - benefit from assessment, intervention and planning where a statutory service is required
  - benefit from timely and holistic decisions made by all involved partners
  - remain living within their own family and community
  - have permanency plans
  - benefit from more timely care planning (where care proceedings are required, these are more likely to be concluded swifter)
  - as care leavers, live in their own suitable accommodation as they enter adulthood
  - as children in our care, live with our own NELC foster carers rather than Independent Fostering Agency carers
  - have positive, inclusive school experiences
- 5.6.2. 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.
- 5.6.3. Key performance headlines are included in appendix 2.

## 5.7. Response to and preparedness for national reforms

- 5.7.1. As part of our ongoing improvement and transformation programme, we remain cognisant of national policy drivers, which have and will continue to shape and influence the shape and structure of our services, and our direction of travel. In response to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill:
- We have identified transformation capacity to support the discovery, design and implementation of the reforms, we are exploring data capacity and systems to ensure they are aligned with anticipated reporting requirements, and we are linking into external mechanisms to listen to, learn from and support our developments
  - We are reviewing and strengthening our governance and reporting arrangements, and plans are progressing to hold multi agency sessions to further socialise and develop our partnership response
  - We have reviewed and re-shaped Family Help in North East Lincolnshire with a view to creating the structure, roles and direction to place us in a strong position to develop family help in with partners in line with the social care reforms
  - We are reviewing our child protection roles and processes alongside its links with the integrated front door, partners, family help and statutory social work in preparation for delivery of new multi-agency child protection approaches
  - We are working with education colleagues, schools and settings to understand and strengthen the education role in safeguarding

- We have reviewed and restructured our fostering service to further develop our bespoke kinship carer offer and are developing this further alongside revising policies and further developing a bespoke offer including the role of the virtual head
- We will be developing family networks and family decision making across the whole service and have worked with our Family Group Conferencing Team to build on and develop their role and delivery
- We are continuing to develop our bespoke housing and support offer to care experienced people including further developing our bespoke staying close support up to 25, the EET offer and mental health pathways as part of a multi-agency approach
- We have enacted an elective home education project to further strengthen our strategic and operational approach

## **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 headlines

Across key metrics, performance trajectories have improved (as at end June 2025), compared to 2021/22, as follows:

- The number of contacts have reduced from 1188 in 2021/22 to 916 as at end June 2025, and as such we are more equipped to consistently manage populations and demand at the Integrated Front Door, ensuring children's needs are being addressed earlier
- The number of referrals have reduced from 291 in 2021/22 to 220 as at end June 2025, and as a result, children's needs are being addressed earlier, and through audit activity, referrals are appropriate
- The number of re-referrals have reduced from 29% in 2021/22 to 14% in the year to date as at end June 2025, which demonstrates the interventions and support are reducing the need for re-referral to children's social care
- Assessment timeliness has improved from 68% in 2021/22 to 95% in the year to date as at end June 2025, which is resulting in children and family's needs being met leading to more positive outcomes
- Numbers of children in need have reduced from 2415 in 2021/22 to 1919 as at end June 2025, as a result of practice in line with need and the positive impact of partner decision making, children's needs being addressed earlier, or being safely stepped down from children protection
- Numbers of children on a child protection plan have reduced from 353 in 2021/22 to 191 as at end June 2025, as a result of being safely stepping down from child protection, and that their needs are being met earlier preventing the need for escalation
- Timeliness of cases in Public Law Outline have improved from 79 weeks in December 2023, to 24.68 weeks as at end June 2025, enabling permanence for our children to be achieved more timely to meet need
- Numbers of children in our care have reduced from 629 in 2021 to 415 as at end June 2025, resulting in more children returning home their families or finding alternative permanence, or through earlier intervention we are reducing the need for children to enter care
- The number of fostering enquiries have improved from 45 in 2021/22, and 24 in the year to date as at end June 2025, which is positively impacting on the numbers of foster carers being approved at panel (3 in 2021/22 compared with 4 in the year to date as at end June 2025)
- The progress and attainment outcomes for 2024 evidence that children in our care in North East Lincolnshire have achieved better than or very closely in line with children in care regionally and nationally across key measures (including Early Years Foundation Stage Profile Good Level of Development, Key Stage 2 Reading, Writing and Maths, and Key Stage 4 English and Maths combined at Grades 4+ and 5+)