

Inspection of North East Lincolnshire local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 14 to 25 July 2025

Lead inspector: Ceri Evans, His Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care	Good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

In 2021, children's services in North East Lincolnshire were judged by Ofsted to be inadequate across all judgement areas. Following the inadequate judgement, the service experienced several changes of interim senior leadership. This contributed to the stalling of improvements given the scale of the issues. Since December 2023, with the appointment of a highly experienced and permanent director of children's services (DCS) and an experienced senior leadership team, the service has undergone profound and positive change. Many children, young people and care leavers are now benefiting from help when their needs are first identified and throughout their social care experience.

Well-delivered investment in the workforce and management capacity has resulted in greater consistency of practice. Leaders, along with wider council members, partner agencies and staff, have been relentless in their focus on delivering effective help and support to children and families in North East Lincolnshire. Improving the lives of children, young people, care leavers and their families now sits at the very heart of service development and delivery. Noteworthy cultural changes across the service have stabilised and galvanised the workforce to have ambition to deliver impactful services that are helping more children, and their families, to thrive.

Trust in children's social care has been rebuilt with key stakeholders and local agency partnerships. These strengthened relationships, greater strategic consensus and shared accountability across agencies have enabled these partnerships to work effectively together to improve outcomes for children, young people and care leavers in North East Lincolnshire.

What needs to improve?¹

- The response to disabled children in need of help and protection. (outcome 3, national framework)
- The timeliness and quality of recordings relating to the pre-proceeding processes as part of the Public Law Outline (PLO). (outcome 1, national framework)
- How well care leavers are supported to understand the purpose of/and sharing of pathway plans. (outcome 4, national framework)

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: good

1. There have been profound and positive improvements to how well children are helped and protected from harm since the last inspection. Of great significance is the use of relational-based approaches to build trusted relationships with children, young people and families, which were so badly broken.
2. Early help arrangements are now a strength. There is a clear and effective strategy that underpins the delivery of these services. Families have easy access to support when they need it in locality family hubs, with signposting to a variety of universal services that help families to address their needs. Determined efforts have been made to strengthen partnerships across the borough. As a result, partners are now engaged and invested in the delivery of the early help offer.
3. Early help assessments are of good quality, and skilled workers communicate and engage with children and their families effectively to understand their experiences and diverse needs. When children's circumstances change, strong management oversight, together with clear step-up and step-down procedures, ensures that children receive the most appropriate service response.
4. Multi-agency working is now prioritised and effective. Senior leaders have fostered a shared approach and accountability across agencies to deliver high-quality help and support to children and their families. Trust has been re-established between partner agencies and children's social care. Partners have

¹ The areas for improvement have been cross-referenced with the outcomes, enablers or principles in the [Children's Social Care: National Framework](#). This statutory guidance sets out the purpose, principles for practice and expected outcomes of children's social care.

been reintroduced into the integrated front door (IFD). They provide constructive challenge and support to practitioners and contribute to effective information-sharing. This is ensuring that the right decisions are being made for children.

5. Social workers in the IFD fully consider the cumulative impact of historical events and trauma on children. Thresholds to access statutory social care are appropriately applied. Interventions are decisive and proportionate when children are at risk of harm. Domestic abuse contacts are managed well through a daily triage meeting with the police, health, education and social care within the multi-agency IFD. A wide range of factors and the impact on children living with domestic abuse are very well understood by practitioners. They show appropriate levels of professional curiosity to help them understand the complexities and strengths within family relationships.
6. Child protection enquiries are timely, and children are seen promptly. Risk is recognised and effective multi-agency information-sharing helps to ensure that risks are well understood. This leads to appropriate decision-making. Strategy discussions have good attendance from partner agencies. Minutes of strategy discussions are detailed and demonstrate how historical concerns are considered, as well as current risk and protective factors to inform decision-making. The emergency duty team is effective and ensures that children are helped and better safeguarded out of hours. Handover arrangements to daytime services have been strengthened.
7. The quality and impact of social work practice have improved considerably since the last inspection. Children now benefit from having permanent social workers who see them regularly and know them well. Social workers and family support workers are well trained in delivering purposeful and age-appropriate direct work. Children's voices are valued within this work, and social workers are genuinely interested in children's views and perspectives. For many children, social work interventions have made a significant difference and have helped to improve their lived experiences.
8. The quality of assessments of children's needs has improved since the last inspection. Social workers acknowledge strengths within families and help families to identify safe and sustainable solutions to improve children's experiences. Assessments are thorough and analytical, leading to effective planning and interventions. Children and families receive help and intervention during the assessment phase, which helps to improve situations for children and, in some instances, helps to reduce the need for longer-term support.
9. Most child in need and child protection plans are detailed and clearly outline the needs and risks of children. Plans have appropriate actions, expected outcomes and timescales to help prevent drift. Overall, children's plans have improved and are of a consistently good quality. Plans are reviewed regularly in multi-agency meetings, and inter-agency working is now a strength.

10. Practice with disabled children has improved since the last inspection in 2021. However, some challenges have remained as some children have experienced delays in receiving support because of changes in the workforce and higher caseloads for some workers. Management oversight has not consistently driven children's plans. Leaders have begun to address this and have credible plans in place to improve this part of the service, including the recent appointments of dedicated managers.
11. When risks to children escalate, appropriate action is taken to progress to the PLO process. Senior managers maintain a thorough oversight of children's cases in the pre-proceedings stage of PLO to monitor levels of risk, progress and timeliness of actions. The strengthened tracking processes help to ensure that children are not subject to pre-proceedings for longer than necessary. PLO meetings are not focused sufficiently on what parents need to do to reduce the risk to their children. Equally, for a small number of children, meetings between social workers, parents and legal teams take too long to convene, and written records do not always acknowledge the rationale for the delay.
12. The responses to managing allegations against professionals who work with children have improved considerably. This was an area for improvement in 2021. Responses to allegations are tracked effectively, and appropriate decision-making helps to ensure that children are better safeguarded.
13. For children aged 16 to 17 who are homeless, there have been improvements in the quality of responses since the previous inspection. The work with housing colleagues has been strengthened so that children's needs are quickly assessed and understood. For most children who present as homeless, there is a quick response to offer support to help the child return to their family when it is safe to do so. However, it is not clear in children's records if they have been informed of their rights and entitlements, including their right to be looked after by the local authority. This has resulted in a very small number of children experiencing a period of instability and uncertainty.
14. Children who are at risk of exploitation benefit from effective multi-agency information-sharing and planning. Children who go missing are offered return home interviews, called 'missing catch-ups', which explore their reasons for going missing. This informs risk management and future planning. This area of practice is much improved since the last inspection, most notably in that children benefit from having a consistent worker whom they trust. This results in children being more able to share critical information about their experiences that workers then use to safety plan and reduce risk.
15. Leaders have taken recent and very decisive action to ensure that young carers are identified and well supported. Young carers are celebrated and encouraged to engage in opportunities that recognise their experiences as a young carer, providing them with a break from caring tasks.

16. The small number of children who are privately fostered receive an effective response. They are visited and supported regularly by a private fostering social worker. Leaders rightly know there is more to do to raise awareness of the identification of these arrangements with the local communities.
17. The local authority has robust systems in place to track and find children missing from school, and workers demonstrate great tenacity in promoting these children's return to education. Checks on children missing education are rigorous, which helps to ensure that children are located as soon as possible. Good systems are also in place to identify and offer support to children who are electively home educated.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

18. Children in care now receive good support from skilled, caring and diligent social workers and carers. Children only come into care when they need to. Whenever possible, social workers try to keep children and young people within their family, if it is safe to do so. Family group conferences and family network meetings are used effectively to identify what support they need and who may be able to safely offer care for children. Inspectors were able to see an increasing number of children being cared for in kinship arrangements, keeping them connected with people they know well.
19. Historically, children in care have experienced multiple changes of worker. This meant that children did not trust or believe that social workers cared for them or cared about them. What has been striking throughout this inspection is the way in which children in care are now seen, heard and valued. Close attention is now paid to their voices. A great deal of work has been undertaken to rebuild this trust with children, and many children in care now enjoy positive relationships with a worker they have had for a longer period. Children spoken with confirmed that while they like their workers, and that they feel listened to and respected, this has not always been the case. Some children understandably still have difficulty trusting their social workers, and for some, this trust may never be regained.
20. Children are now visited at a frequency that meets their needs. This includes visits to those children who are living outside the borough. Children are supported to talk about their lives and experiences through age-appropriate and effective direct work. Recent investment in direct work kits and memberships to a life-story delivery model are helping contribute to children's sense of identity and understanding of the reasons they came into care. While this is a positive development, it is very recent, and not all children in care benefit from understanding their life story.
21. Social workers spoke about 'their children' with a great deal of pride and affection. They are effective at helping children maintain friendships and family connections. Social workers embrace the new ways of working and innovations, such as the recently developed lifelong links service. Inspectors could already

see the positive impact, with some brothers and sisters being helped to reconnect after many years apart and social workers feeling confident and supported with time and training to do this vital work.

22. The long history of previous poor practice has contributed to delay for many children in progressing their plans for permanence. This was an area for improvement at the last inspection. In the last 19 months, there has been a strong emphasis placed on ensuring that children have a secure and stable family to support them through childhood and beyond. A significant number of children in care now have a ratified plan of permanence, but this is not the case for all children.
23. Most children's care plans address their needs very well and are reviewed effectively within the required timescale by independent reviewing officers (IROs). IROs know children well and encourage them to attend their reviews and have a say about what is important to them. IROs are also making better use of formal dispute resolution processes by escalating concerns when children's plans are drifting. While this is a positive improvement, these escalations relate mostly to systems and process gaps, and less about the quality and impact of practice and children's experiences. Leaders acknowledge this is an area for further development and began to address this during this inspection.
24. Placement stability has also improved. Most children now live in settled placements in or close to their local communities. Most children in care live with foster carers. An increasing number of children are securing permanence through living with connected carers who later secure special guardianship orders (SGOs) if that is the best plan for the child. SGO assessments are well considered in terms of the child's safety and the sustainability of the placement. Support plans are comprehensive, with good financial support packages. This is helping to promote and sustain these permanent arrangements for children.
25. Children are placed with their parents when it is appropriate. Children who return home to their parents' care benefit from purposeful work and support, both before and after reunification. For those children who live at home on statutory orders, their care plans and progress are robustly overseen by senior managers, and their plans are actively reviewed to secure permanence at the earliest opportunity.
26. Children live in children's homes when this is the right plan for them. There has been significant investment in improving the quality of the local authority's own children's homes in the past 19 months, with very positive results. Many children who have previously lived out of the borough are being appropriately returned to their home area. Many children now receive good-quality care and support. Social workers visit their children regularly to understand children's views and oversee their progress. Staff and social workers are aspirational for children and young people's education and for their health and emotional well-being.

27. The headteacher of the virtual school has a clear vision for the support provided to children in care. The quality of personal education plans (PEPs) has improved significantly. PEPs are reviewed termly to ensure that the child is making the educational progress needed. Children are well supported by their carers and social workers to have interests and hobbies. They have access to a wide range of opportunities that they like. These experiences help to expand children's horizons and allow them to be children, play and have fun.
28. Most disabled children in care live in stable homes. Multi-agency partners contribute to disabled children's care plans in a way they never did before. There is now shared accountability and responsibility for the care and progress of disabled children across the partnership. As a result, children's complex health and education needs are better understood and responded to, and disabled children are making better progress from their starting points.
29. The in-house fostering service has been completely transformed in the last 19 months. This has resulted in the retention of many foster carers who were previously unsupported and at risk of leaving the service, and the increased number of carers now in assessment. Foster carers reported to inspectors that the service now has its own identity. They reported that they feel better supported. Inspectors found that foster carers have much-improved training opportunities and are now recognised as valued members of the professional team around children in care.
30. The local authority is a member of a regional adoption agency, One Adoption. Children benefit from an effective adoption service led by experienced and knowledgeable managers. The assessment of prospective adopters is thorough and detailed, and post-adoption support is effective. The connectivity that now exists between locality social work teams, the fostering team and One Adoption has resulted in more children benefiting from a stable, secure home.
31. Only one child currently lives in a bespoke unregistered children's home. This decision has only been made when other options have been exhausted for the child to be safeguarded and cared for effectively. Senior leaders do not take decisions to place any child in an unregistered children's home lightly and ensure this is for the shortest period while searches for registered homes continue. When possible, they encourage providers to register with Ofsted. Social workers increase their visiting, and strong senior leadership oversight provides the local authority with assurances about the quality of care that children receive.
32. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are well supported by social workers who take time to understand their experiences, trauma and loss. Social workers build trust, acting as advocates, and ensure that their specific and diverse needs are met. This includes providing practical support, such as assistance with accommodation, healthcare, education and the asylum process, as well as emotional and psychological support. They understand the complex legal and policy frameworks and advocate for their rights.

33. Since the last inspection, senior leaders have had a specific objective to understand the risks and better safeguard their children in care. Social workers, alongside wider partners, act swiftly to better safeguard children and young people from harm and try to disrupt and prevent exploitation to reduce risks. Risk assessments are now dynamic, and they are regularly updated and reviewed through a vulnerability risk management process.
34. The views and experiences of children in care are now actively sought through a wide range of voice and engagement mechanisms. The Voice Listen Up 'influencers' meet regularly with members of the corporate and community parenting board through meetings, activity sessions and individual conversations. They also have a good relationship with the leadership team, which meets monthly to hear the experiences of children in care firsthand. Children also told inspectors that they feel more valued, with one child saying: 'Things feel different, better now! You see more of the leadership team and others too. They know us and we know them. They are now more interested in what we have to say.'

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

35. Care leavers now have adults in their lives that they can trust and who are ambitious for them. Senior leaders have implemented a whole-service transformation of the leaving care service. This has created a culture where increasing numbers of staff in the service and across the wider council want the best outcomes and experiences for their care leavers. The service is now unrecognisable from that which existed at the last inspection, but these changes are recent. It is too soon to measure sustainability, although the indicators are so far very positive.
36. The leaving care service now becomes actively involved with children in care early. The focus of this early allocation is on relationship-building and information-sharing. Children in care now experience an effective transition to the leaving care service at 18, and when appropriate, they begin to develop some of the skills needed for adulthood before they move to the service.
37. Personal advisers (PAs) are persistent in developing meaningful relationships with young people who are hard to engage and to earn their trust. The extent of this work must not be underestimated. Too many care leavers have had poor experiences as children in care that have impacted on their ability to trust social care practitioners and leaders. PAs have worked tirelessly to rebuild broken relationships and develop new ones. This is helping some care leavers seek out support when they are in need and be ready and more open to accept help.
38. PAs now visit care leavers in line with their needs. The flexible drop-in sessions at the care leavers' hub are also valued by young people. They often pop in for support with finances, writing CVs and completing job applications, or just for a quick cup of tea and a chat. Inspectors could clearly see how this relational approach is enabling the development of positive relationships.

39. Most care leavers live in suitable accommodation. A range of different accommodation types is explored with care leavers, including 'staying put', supported accommodation or having their own tenancies. Since the last inspection, leaders have strengthened the commissioning and contract arrangements with providers. This has led to an increase in the availability of different types of accommodation provision.
40. Care leavers now have access to PA support until the age of 25 (and beyond, if needed). Recently, leaders took proactive steps to re-engage those young people who were previously closed and not offered a service post-21. Many care leavers have re-engaged with the service as a result. The ethos of the service now is that the door is left open.
41. The relaunch of the local offer has led to increasing numbers of care leavers understanding their entitlement. The local offer is comprehensive for both those who live in and out of area. The local offer is clearly set out online and in a published booklet that is easy to navigate. PAs strongly advocate for care leavers to ensure that they receive the individual support that they need.
42. Care leavers are supported to register with a doctor and dentist local to where they live. They are helped to obtain and understand their health histories and access the services they need. This includes access to specialist services when they need them to help improve their physical and mental well-being. They are helped to retain important relationships and are helped to stay close to their friends, previous carers and extended family, and wherever possible, reunification is promoted.
43. Pathway plans are completed collaboratively with some care leavers. Many are a lovely read and reflect the care leavers' individuality, views, wishes and aspirations. A small number of care leavers who spoke with inspectors did not fully understand the purpose of their plan, and it is unclear in records whether care leavers are routinely given a copy of their plan.
44. PAs have high ambitions for their care leavers, providing support and encouragement to access education, employment and training. The number of care leavers in education, employment and training has improved slightly for 17- to 18-year-olds since the last inspection, and for those aged 19 to 21, there has been some recent improvement. Inspectors saw that more young people are now returning to education, are in apprenticeships or being supported to find employment. For some care leavers, this has been life-changing as they have started to believe and have confidence in their abilities.
45. Former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who are now care leavers are well supported by knowledgeable and skilled PAs. PAs are making good use of interpreters to ensure that they have a clear understanding of young people's wishes and to help them understand their legal rights and support them with their asylum applications.

46. Young people who are particularly vulnerable, such as those at risk due to poor mental health, those who have substance misuse issues or who are at risk of exploitation, receive an effective multi-agency response. PAs are very skilled at having sensitive discussions with care leavers to help them stay safer and access support and specialist services as needed.
47. Care leavers who are parents benefit from a wide range of support and advice. This includes accessing parenting classes or baby groups in the family hubs. When young people are not able to continue to care for their children, there is sensitive and effective joint working across the service to ensure that children are safeguarded, and young parents are best supported.
48. Care leavers in custody receive regular visits from their PA. Planning for their release starts early and appropriately focuses on the wide-ranging needs of the young person. Improved management oversight in the service helps to ensure that proactive planning takes place to support care leavers' rehabilitation back into the community.
49. Care leavers have improved opportunities to influence the design of services through their various platforms for participation. Their views are clearly valued and inform service design and delivery. Care leavers who spoke with inspectors say that they 'finally feel listened to' and that things have improved significantly over the last 12 months.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: outstanding

50. In October 2021, the Ofsted inspection of children's social care in North East Lincolnshire judged services and children's experience as inadequate across all areas. Several interim leadership arrangements meant the path to improvement was slow. A local improvement partner intervention commenced in November 2022. This partnership was purposeful, but again progress was slow to gather pace such was the scale of improvement needed. In December 2023, a permanent and highly experienced DCS was appointed. This led to the appointment of a high-quality, experienced senior leadership team. The pace and scale of improvement have since been rapid.
51. A whole-service transformation has been achieved. Children's services are largely unrecognisable from what they were in 2021. Leaders have been tenacious in their approach and commitment to deliver impactful services. This has significantly improved the lives and experiences of many children and their families in North East Lincolnshire.
52. Leaders at a corporate and political level now take an active interest in the impact of children's social care in their area. The new chief executive and political leaders bring a renewed determination to embed corporate parenting principles and do all they can to support children and care leavers to live meaningful and fulfilling lives. The inclusion of children and care leavers at the

corporate parenting board is now a key strength. This brings rigour and challenge, and leaders respond appropriately. Children's voices and experiences are firmly at the centre of service improvement and delivery.

53. Partnership engagement is now a real strength. Previously, local agency partners lost trust and confidence in children's social care. The DCS has made the rebuilding of these crucial relationships to become fully involved in the improvement agenda a key strategic priority. There is now mutual respect and common purpose, with priorities aligned across the partnership. Feedback from police, the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) and the judiciary is positive. They told inspectors that communication is strong, and they have seen vastly improved practice. They described an 'authentic' and 'responsive' leadership team and have every confidence that issues are now dealt with as soon as they arise.
54. Senior leaders know their service extremely well. Their self-evaluation was honest and detailed, with a clear evaluation of strengths and areas for development. Inspectors did not tell them anything they did not already know. They understand the needs of the children, young people and families that live in their area. They develop and commission services to meet local need to improve children's experiences and outcomes.
55. Leaders have a very clear line of sight to the quality and impact of practice. Performance data and audit activity have been strengthened and are used well to understand and analyse the impact of services on children and to identify where improvement is needed or possible. Frontline management oversight is strong and consistent. Managers provide clear direction and good-quality supervision and support to staff. Supervision is described as regular, and records evidence increasing reflective discussions that are helping to drive progress in children's plans.
56. Commissioning arrangements have also been strengthened, and placement sufficiency issues are well understood and managed, always with children's safety and well-being in mind. The sufficiency strategy has been completely revamped in recognition of the need for a more diverse range of carers to meet children's needs. Leaders are delivering the objectives set out in the strategy, but they also have a thorough understanding of current and future need. They are committed to working in partnership with parents and to keeping children and young people within their family, wherever it is safe to do so.
57. The fostering service has been completely transformed, with a significant increase in fostering enquiries and assessments this year. There has been a vast improvement in the quality of local authority children's homes, with credible plans to open new children's homes so that children who are currently placed out of area can live closer to home.
58. Senior leaders are highly visible, approachable and transparent. They model expected standards and behaviours, which encourages their workforce to do

better for children and care leavers. They invite and welcome external challenge and support and reach out to local partners to help them to address barriers to supporting children, young people and their families.

59. The outstanding success that these senior leaders have achieved in transforming children's social care services in such a short timescale is impressive. From the outset, they had a clear vision of what they wanted to achieve, and they have delivered this improvement at pace across the service. What is also impressive is the recognition that none of this is possible without a committed and stable workforce. One of the biggest barriers to improvement had been the unstable and unsupported workforce. This has changed beyond recognition.
60. Children, young people, care leavers and their families now benefit from a fully resourced and almost permanent social care workforce that is committed to supporting the children, young people and families. Leaders have cultivated the working conditions and supportive culture that enables staff to practise safely and effectively.
61. Children are no longer experiencing multiple changes of worker, and many now benefit from having a trusted adult in their lives. Workers who spoke with inspectors said that they feel valued. Their morale is high, and they appreciate the high level of support and constructive challenge they receive from their managers. The workforce knows their senior leaders well; many appreciate them and many feel respected and cared for in return.
62. Since the last inspection, there has been a steady reduction in caseloads. This is enabling creative and impactful direct work with children and their families. Social workers told inspectors that they no longer feel like they are 'fighting fire' and can spend quality time with the children they support. The learning and development offer to staff has also been enhanced. Leaders have high ambitions for their workforce. There is good access to training, and leaders are developing career pathways, such as becoming practice leads or practice teachers. Consequently, staff feel invested in, and retention rates have improved significantly.
63. Finally, some of the social workers, family support practitioners and PAs who have been in the local authority since the previous inspection confidently told inspectors that they can see how the change in culture is improving children's lives. They have trust in the leadership team, enjoy their jobs and are glad to see that positive changes have been made for children and their families in North East Lincolnshire.

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