

CHILDREN AND LIFELONG LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL

DATE	21st July 2026
REPORT OF	Ann-Marie Matson, Director of Children's Services
SUBJECT	Children's Services Improvement and Transformation Journey and Update
STATUS	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

The journey from 2021 to the full Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) in July 2025, was significant, with an amplified focus and pace of transformational change which began late 2023 rooted in continuous listening, learning, reviewing and adapting, to enhance and embed practice and to improve the experiences and outcomes of children, young people and families. This was demonstrated by the outcomes of the ILACS in which we were judged to be good with outstanding leadership and management.

Since then, we have continued the progress so that even more children and young people have improved outcomes and experiences across the borough. This continuing journey has resulted in substantial benefits for children and young people, who are now more likely to:

- be listened to, with their views taken into account and their needs met
- be supported by permanent staff, resulting in fewer changes in their workers
- receive early support from across the system, reducing the likelihood of needing statutory services
- remain living within their own family and community
- as care leavers, live in suitable accommodation as they transition into adulthood
- as children in our care, live with our own NELC foster carers rather than Independent Fostering Agency carers
- have positive, inclusive school experiences

In the context of the Children's Services improvement and transformation journey, across the scope of children's social care, youth justice, education, SEND and inclusion, there is recognition that the whole system, not just Children's Services, is pivotal in improving the experiences and outcomes for our children, young people and families. Underpinned by a simple unified approach, and on integrated working, there has been significant, and transformative progress in the relationships between Children's Services, the wider Council and the wider Partnership, which are now built on trust, transparency, high support and high challenge, with children, young people and families first, centre and last in all we do.

'It takes a village' to achieve better outcomes for our children, young people, and families and we have made significant strides in building relationships with the community, including local businesses and community champions, who share our commitment to improving outcomes for our children, young people and their families across the Borough.

We continue to focus on promoting Children's Services and the wider Council as an employer of choice. This effort is yielding rewards in terms of unparalleled recruitment increases and positive perceptions of the Council among the workforce, community and beyond. We continue to focus on workforce communications and engagement, building a culture underpinned by love and care. We have developed and championed various opportunities to connect, build relationships, find solutions, challenge and support each other, share best practices, and celebrate our achievements. This spirit of 'permission to be proud' has been instrumental in our progress.

Our investment in the Children's Services workforce and progress against our improvement and transformation plan, including sector-led improvement and transformation funding, has helped achieve sustained workforce stability. This has led to an unprecedented reduction in agency workers and the recruitment of even more permanent social workers in the last year, as well as the previous one, compared to none in 2023.

The ever improving sufficiency landscape and oversight are also enabling stability and a continuing reduction in external placements, with more children returning to the Borough. While this remains a budget pressure, we have strengthened our oversight and system leadership, resulting in a significantly improved budget position over the past two years, in the context of investing to save.

We are ambitious for the future and for our children, young people, and families, and we have the highest expectations of ourselves and of working together with partners to improve outcomes across the Borough. We recognise the importance of supporting and enabling North East Lincolnshire to raise its local, regional and national profile, and the added value of listening to and learning from others.

As a result of the national reforms and our response to them, other place-based initiatives and collaboration with national leaders and change makers, we strive to ensure that any and all opportunities generate the change and growth needed for the area and the children, young people, families and communities we serve. Through our regeneration agenda, the ambition is to build an economy that supports its community, and that they are skilled and engaged to support a buoyant economy in return.

We understand our areas of strength, as well as our areas for ongoing development and priority areas of focus for 2026/27, and we are working hard to ensure that we continue to embed the conditions for our practice to thrive, with the intention of leading to better experiences and outcomes for our children, young people and families. As we move forward, we are cognisant of the need to further embed and consolidate, but also to build on the positive foundations and to create further opportunities for transformation and innovation.

MATTERS FOR CONSIDERATION

This report seeks to update scrutiny panel members on the Children's Services improvement and transformation journey, and to demonstrate the breadth and depth of our key activities, impacts and outcomes, as well as key headlines pertaining our current position and self -assessment including key performance comparators.

1. BACKGROUND AND ISSUES

1.1. Following the 2021 Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) 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.

1.2. In the scope of the subsequent 2025 ILACS feedback, there were three identified areas for action. Significant progress has been made in each of these, including:

The response to disabled children in need of help and protection

- The overall practice continues to improve for children with a disability and there is an ongoing focus on aligning practice with the wider safeguarding offer
- From March 2025, a dedicated Service Lead came into post with specific responsibility for children with disability. This has now enabled stability of leadership for the workforce to drive forward practice and outcomes, and which has enabled connectivity with the wider service
- Task and finish groups and consultation with parents regarding short breaks and work is ongoing to develop the short breaks community offer
- Focus on practice and outcomes at child in need / child protection assurance meetings
- The appointment of a EHCP social care coordinator to support responses for EHCP's and ensure increased quality of information
- Further work is also ongoing in the following development areas to improve practice and the experiences of children:
 - Training for the team relating to specialist communication needs
 - Enhancing the use of family networks within support
 - Strengthening of the resource panel
 - Enhancing the parent / carer elements of the assessment in partnership with family help

The timeliness and quality of recordings relating to pre proceeding processes as part of the public law outline (PLO)

- We have improved the timeliness and quality of recordings with weekly mechanisms in place to monitor the timeliness of the initial PLO letters and meetings, and we have reviewed the PLO protocol.
- There has been positive progress seen in pre-proceedings and public law oversight and timescales
- The average length of time for proceedings has reduced significantly,

- The number of children within proceedings have reduced, this has not only been contributed by us achieving permanency for children and concluding proceedings but also due to the strengthened oversight

How well care leavers are supported to understand the purpose of / and sharing of pathway ways

- We have further supported care leavers to understand their pathway plans
- A pathway plan development workshop package was designed and delivered by the Deputy Service Director and Service Lead to focus on co-design with young people, aspirations and voice
- Improved the recording system which is contributing to improved records relating to pathway plans, which are shared consistently with our care leavers
- Developed our relational recording, writing directly to our young people
- The timeliness and quality of pathway plans is showing consistent and sustained improvement and continues to be a focus of managers within the team

2. RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

- 2.1. Led through the Continuous Improvement and Transformation 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 and respond to national policy drivers and reforms, significantly the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act, SEND Reform Plan 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.
- 2.4. The milestones and requirements to respond bring about opportunities, but also risks in terms of compliance with expected delivery timescales i.e. in relation to the Families First Partnership Programme, but also our ability to draw down funding streams should we not meet expectations i.e. in relation to the SEND Reform Plan, the latter of which would have significant implications for our DSG overspend.
- 2.5. We are on target to meet the required Families First Partnership Programme delivery milestones (by March 2027) and the feedback pertaining the SEND Reform Plan, up to the point of submission was very positive, and we are currently awaiting confirmation regarding approval of the plan and funding implications (due September 2026).

3. REPUTATION AND COMMUNICATIONS CONSIDERATIONS

We continue to promote NELC as a place to work including via social media channels, and through face to face opportunities at meetings and events; 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. It is also particularly important in relation to the recruitment of foster carers to meet our sufficiency needs for the children in our care.

4. FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

- 4.1. The DfE previously 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 and transformation 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.
- 4.4. As referenced in 2.4 above, there are significant financial implications associated with the SEND Reform Plan, and if approved in September 2026, we will receive circa £25 million which will underwrite the Dedicated Schools Grant overspend.
- 4.5. Across the scope of Children's Services, we have significantly reduced the overspend previously experienced in children's social care due to the high usage of agency staffing and external provision for children in our care. Cash spend on children's social care has reduced from £57.8M (in 2022/2023) to £45.7M (2025/2026).
- 4.6. There are continued budget pressures in relation to children with complex needs and their education resulting in costs increasing over the same period from £7.4M to £23.7M - this is primarily due to the spend against the Dedicated Schools Grant due to the need for specialist places and Education Other Than At School (EOTAS) packages.

5. CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1. Taking account of self-assessment of Children's Services in the context of the wider system, this next section draws out a summary position relating to our improvement and transformation priorities to demonstrate our journey, and the associated impacts and outcomes, current headlines in line with our self-assessment, along with performance comparators and next steps:

5.1.1 Embed our empowering leadership and management approach

We have further developed our practice approach to become a 'unified approach', that is relational, strengths based, solution focused, child first and trauma aware, with a focus on place based and integrated working across the Borough, all underpinned by a high challenge/high support ethos.

Our commitment to placing children and young people at the heart of everything we do is resolute. We are dedicated to creating and sustaining an environment where the voices and experiences of our children, young people, and families are not only heard but deeply valued. We have significantly raised the profile and strengthened our Corporate and Community Parenting arrangements, which have been wholeheartedly embraced across the Borough, showcasing our partnership's re-commitment to our promise.

We recognise our workforce as our most valuable asset and understand the critical importance of having consistent, permanent leaders and managers within Children's Services.

We have embedded our response to the national children's system reforms into our ongoing improvement and transformation activity and are in a strong position to continue to develop and embed local arrangements to meet national expectations, and ultimately to improve our ability to make a difference to the lives, experiences and outcomes of our children and young people.

We have:

- Transformed our strategic and assurance frameworks, including key strategies, partnership and governance arrangements, mechanisms for scrutiny of practice, supervision and management oversight at all levels
- Raised the profile of and strengthened our Corporate and Community Parenting arrangements across the partnership, which is having a positive impact on the breadth of our offer to children and young people
- Transformed the Safeguarding Children Partnership local arrangements, including associated functions
- Developed the 'Growing Stronger Together' strategic framework for children, young people and families, which sets the blueprint for the way we work together across the partnership
- Collaborated with the Centre of Young Lives to develop the Growing Up Well charter, which reinforces the need for a partnership approach to supporting children and young people to have positive emotional wellbeing and mental health
- Represented NEL in the House of Lords at the launch of the Raising the Nation Play Commission 'Everything to Play For' report which helped to drive forward our collaborative working across the Council and the wider partnership to build on and further explore, develop and drive forward our ambition for NEL to be a playful place in the context of 'permission to play' and 'play together'

- Agreed an amplified strategic focus on developing community awareness and intelligence to listen to and take account of the views and experiences of children and young people who are at risk of or have experienced child exploitation, and to positively disrupt exploitation
- Introduced 'Building Futures' to support parents who have previously had a child removed with a view to children not being further taken into care
- Enhanced the children's advocacy offer which is supporting more children in our care and children in need of protection to represent their voice, views and experiences in decision making and planning; and 25 Buddies now recruited to, with 20 currently matched to offer children a 'trusted relationship' which constitutes at least 6.5% of eligible population which is higher than comparators
- Engaging with and consulting with key stakeholders across the partnership, and young people themselves, to develop the youth offer, and associated governance arrangements

5.1.2 Help, support and protect our children, young people and families

The significant investment in a stable and permanent workforce has enabled strong foundations for practice and better quality and impact of intervention with families. This is timelier and affects change sooner leading to children being safer. The permanent management team continues to drive forward the practice developments and outcomes for children.

We have strengthened the integrated partner relationships and sharpened the focus in the partnership response to meeting children's needs early to prevent risk from escalating and have seen an increase in Family help and a reduction in the children being referred into statutory social work.

There are now more children living safely with their families, there has been an increase in the number of children who have successfully stepped down from child protection and out of child in need but we continue to work with our partners to embed this for all children. Where children do require statutory intervention, this is timely, of improved quality and has greater manager oversight meaning that risk is identified swiftly and reduced.

We have:

- Continued timely decision making in the Integrated Front Door which is in turn reducing risk and responding to need appropriately for children focused on keeping children safely within their family networks
- Amplified the focus on the identification of children at risk of or experiencing exploitation and those exploiting them
- Strengthened our family hub offer 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
- Raised the importance and quality of direct work which has enabled change to be affected,
- Strengthened our offer for young carers that is focusing 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
- Improved consistency of practice across private fostering arrangements
- Strengthened systems and frameworks for homeless 16/17 year olds
- Strengthened our focus on supporting victims within the youth justice system; and developed performance data and monitoring arrangements

5.1.3 Deliver a high quality offer for children in our care

We believe that children should have every opportunity and the support they need to live within their family networks. When children do need to enter our care, we strive to ensure that they have the highest quality support, care, planning and services to be able to fully achieve their potential.

To achieve this, there is an ongoing focus on the practice, planning and outcomes for our children alongside the development and delivery of the best children's home and fostering provision that meets their needs and provides to care, love and stability children and young people need. There are currently 412 children in our care.

The care population has continued its downward trend, with reduced numbers of children entering care through our focus on the right help in their families, effective help and improvements in the quality of management oversight and decision making, alongside children in our care being enabled and supported to return, where possible, to their family or to alternative permanence.

We have ensured an ongoing focus upon permanence planning and developing progressive plans that focus on impact and direct work with children and young people. There is a continued focus on stability and providing support to carers overseen by key managers and the development of the fostering offer focuses on a skills-based model supported by comprehensive training, development and engagement with carers. The recruitment of carers has been a key priority and has shown demonstrable success with an increase in enquiries, assessments and approvals. This includes the Foster Friendly Business scheme that has continued to grow significantly throughout the year.

We have:

- 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
- Long-term matched children to their foster carers enabling them to have improved stability
- Created a stable, permanent workforce 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 assessment and intervention
- We continue to develop our children's homes landscape to enable more our children and young people to live in our community (with one new NELC home and one new NAVIGO home registered, and a further NELC home pending)
- Embedding new multi-agency arrangements to support the emotional health and wellbeing of children, and increased oversight of children's experiences living out of the borough
- Continuing focus on relational approach at the heart of our fostering offer, including events, activities and development opportunities
- 1 newly LA children's home recently registered with Ofsted, 1 Navigo children's home now registered and plans for our children to return home, with a further LA children's home pending (following a period of refurbishment)
- Supported Accommodation provision successfully registered through Ofsted, which followed focussed activity in relation to policy alignment, strengthening support planning, embedding of risk management and staff development

5.1.4 Ensure sufficient suitable homes for children in our care

It is our core belief that children should be supported and enabled to live in their own family networks in their own communities. When children enter our care it is our aim to have sufficient, local, family-based provision to meet their needs.

Our focus is on developing and increasing our local provision to enable children to return to the area where possible or be placed with local carers when entering care.

We have refreshed the fostering management structure to provide further capacity in relation to both the recruitment and retention of carers as well as providing the best assessment and support to kinship carers. The shape of the team has also been reviewed to enable consistency in assessment, support and challenge across both mainstream and kinship carers with clear management and accountability structures. It also places the team in a strong position to deliver the Kinship Zone in North East Lincolnshire.

Children's Homes quality of practice is a key focus including oversight, compliance, processes, practice and focus on the values and culture in the homes.

Our progress is evidenced by a substantial reduction in children placed with

externally commissioned providers enabling children to live within their own communities (reduced from 193 in early 2024 to (currently) 119)

5.1.5 Sufficiency of Foster Carers

Foster carers are our key asset in providing the love care and stability that our children need. Providing the best, high-quality and sustainable foster care is a key priority and the Council, our partners and the whole community have got behind our foster carers in new and inspiring ways that have transformed how we deliver foster care in North East Lincolnshire.

This includes:

Recruitment of foster carers

- Engagement with local employers and communities further expanding on the success of our Foster Friendly Business scheme. In April 2026 we celebrated the 2-year anniversary of Grimsby Town Football Club becoming the first foster friendly business. 229 businesses have now signed up to be fostering friendly and a further 50 local schools, nurseries and settings
- Painting the area orange – numerous activities, examples and events continue throughout the year have made sure that our fostering orange is visible, seen and at the heart of the community
- Capacity to deliver the recruitment of carers – including within the Council's Communications and Marketing Team, through independent support to the Fostering Team and further recruitment posts. This includes a comms officer with a background in publicity with a focus on fostering recruitment and retention. This has improved further our social media, web-based and community presence.
- Direct involvement of the Council's existing foster carers who have completed videos, webinars, spoken on local radio and take part in numerous recruitment events and activities. There is a comprehensive programme of activities during both Fostering Fortnight and throughout the year leading to a substantial increase in activity across the community
- The increased focus on promotional and recruitment activity is showing an improved interest in fostering within North East Lincolnshire with an increase in the number of foster carers approved during 2025/26.
- 19 fostering households were approved in 2025-26, compared with 6 in 2024-25 (the same as the previous year). A further 15 households are currently under assessment
- There has been a net gain of 9 foster carers during the year. This is expected to increase further during 2026/27.

Retention of Foster Carers

- The fostering management team continues to build and develop the relationship with carers through foster carers voice, opportunities for engagement and the continued refreshing of the offer to foster carers. This has received very positive feedback from the carers. Examples this year include revising and updating the staying-put arrangements for carers, developing further engagement opportunities and refreshing the training and development programme – including (at the carers request) bespoke sessions with care-experienced national speaker, Nick Barwick, sharing his experience of foster care.
- The team is fully staffed with permanent social workers enabling consistency of support and challenge to carers.
- Engagement and consultation takes place with our Foster Carers on a regular basis. We have built positive relationships based on relational practice and supported Foster Carers to grow and develop the service alongside us.
- Foster Carers have been consulted with in relation to a revised training framework, further enhancement of our relationships with the North East Lincolnshire Foster Carers Association, the, now embedded, refreshed allowance framework and financial support (including funded Council Tax), support through the Foster Friendly scheme and increased events and activities for carers.
- Meet the managers events continue at regular intervals

5.1.6 The North East Lincolnshire Kinship Zone

North East Lincolnshire is one of the 7 local authorities selected to be a Kinship Zone, and it officially launched on 1st April 2026. It has 2 core pillars:

- Kinship Zones will test whether the introduction of a regular financial allowance to eligible kinship carers, paid at the same rate as the fostering national minimum allowance but non means tested will support outcomes for children, whilst also incentivising Kinship Foster Carers to seek Special Guardianship or “lives with” Child Arrangement Orders
- Delivering Family Network Support Package (FNSP) that offer financial and practical help to families and family network members, with the aim of unlocking the barriers that prevent them from providing support to their relatives, enabling more children to live at home with their birth parents, or to support a transition home or into kinship care

Progress so far:

Created a process to enable kinship carers to apply for the kinship funding. This included building and creating an application on our website. We have onboarded 299 kinship carers, (49 of these were not previously in receipt of financial support) which is benefitting 405 children.

In relation to the second element of the pilot, we created a robust FNSP and wider kinship support delivery plan which was formally approved by the DfE in late May.

Utilising the additional Kinship Zone funding, we have created new roles to form the basis for our kinship local offer and reach out and wrap around kinship carers and children in our community. This includes:

- Virtual School inclusion officers
- Educational Psychologists
- Specialist Clinical Psychologist and Senior CAMHS Practitioner
- Kinship support workers based across services
- Aspirations and pathways advisor for young people in kinship care

We have also commissioned the national Kinship charity reach programme, for those kinship carers who may live some distance or, would like virtual support instead of in person.

We are training staff across services to support and deliver family network meetings and we have now also had the processes in place to review and consider referrals for FNSP funding, in being able break down any barriers to networks supporting birth parents. To date, these funding packages have supported 44 children to remain living in their family networks.

5.1.7 Deliver a high-quality offer for care leavers

In North East Lincolnshire, we hold strong belief that care leavers are an asset to our local community and have the potential to achieve incredible outcomes. We treat our young people with respect, compassion and care and expect the same for them as we would our own children.

We have continued to build upon the changes and improvements including increased choice and availability of suitable accommodation, investment in the leaving care service, development of employment, training opportunities, engagement with care leavers, and partnership buy-in as Corporate and Community Parents to support care leavers of all ages.

The commitment of the Council to care experienced people has been demonstrated by the adoption of care experience as a protected characteristic and promotion of the needs of care experienced people across the Council. The development of the Family Enterprise has further demonstrated the whole council commitment to achieving better outcomes for care leavers.

We have updated and improved our comprehensive local offer to care leavers, in partnership with our young people. The offer is holistic, includes support from across the partnership and was co-produced with care experienced young people, and the 2025/26 review of the offer demonstrates our ongoing commitment to ensuring this is a dynamic and responsive offer.

Further investment has been made within the service throughout 25/26, including additional staffing resources, financial investment in the updated local offer, alongside the development of a dedicated hub for care leavers.

We have:

- Co-produced with care experienced young people and launched a transformed, local offer to care leavers, building on raising aspirations and life opportunities for young people
- 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
- 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 the North East Lincolnshire Family Enterprise project to enable employment and training opportunities for care leavers
- Supported more care leavers to take up education, employment or training opportunities
- 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
- Developed a bespoke Care Leaver 'hub', named The Base
- Continued to develop the corporate grandparenting offer, ensuring our care leavers become the best possible parents themselves.
- Collaborative work progressing to develop a peer mentor scheme specifically for care leavers
- Increasing scope of opportunities to listen to and take account of care leavers views and experiences i.e. via quarterly questions, creative conversation, drop ins, exit from care interviews (new name TBC)
- Ongoing focus on enhancing care leaver housing options, which is benefitting from renewed system leadership

5.1.8 Develop the quality of our learning and education landscape for all children

In North East Lincolnshire we have 61 primary and secondary schools and academies, including two special academies and two alternative provision academies. Of these, 59 (97%) are judged good or outstanding under the old inspection framework. There remain four primary schools, two nursery schools and one daycare setting that are maintained by the Local Authority.

In academic year 2024/25 outcomes in the early years and Key Stage 2 were

broadly in line with national for all children across the Borough.

School attendance is a Borough wide priority evidenced through the 2025 Attendance Conference organised jointly with our Systems Leaders, with over 200 local attendees Attendance across Primary, Secondary and Special sectors has improved overall, with gaps narrowing for children with Free School Meals, children with a social worker, and children with an EHCP. North East Lincolnshire rank 1st nationally for 2024/25 attendance for Special Schools

North East Lincolnshire has a high proportion of children who are EHE; this has been attributed to the higher-than-average levels of social deprivation and free school meals, however, the local authority are working closely with families and those settings whose rolls have been impacted due to the high numbers of children and young people leaving to become EHE to strengthen early intervention, parental engagement and support with school admissions to return to school. The new EHE strategy and capacity to coordinate our offer and visits to families has been increased, ensuring children and families are supported at the earliest opportunity, with a recent round table event held, and the voice of our EHE children shared with key partners. No children in our care are EHE

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
- 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 with core members of the local authority, Regional Directors and Chief Executives of Multi-Academy Trusts as a core mechanism for collaborating, shaping, influencing, challenging and supporting wider educational challenges such as attendance, exclusions and SEND Reforms
- The SEND Reforms will also see the establishment of a Strategic Education Board to ensure that education settings from Early Years, schools and college settings are engaged in reform and coproduction
- Developed an Inclusion and Belonging pledge with local schools and businesses, including Wilkin, Chapman and Rollits, Centre 4 and Horizon Youth Zone
- Ordinarily Available Mainstream Practices/Ordinarily Available Provision workstream progressing with activities focussed around planning platform, design, co-production with schools and SENCOs building on the draft document. This will launch at the next SENCO Forum 7 July and focuses on children receiving support in mainstream schools at the earliest opportunity and clarifies borough wide expectations of what inclusive mainstream practice is

- The Early Years team to create a localised programme for practitioners working with children 2 to 5 years and working towards recruiting SEND experts based in every Family Hub, in in with Best Start in Life reforms

5.1.9 Develop a high quality SEND offer for children, young people and their parents/carers

North East Lincolnshire's SEND system is facing significant and growing pressure from rising complexity of need, increasing statutory demand, and escalating costs linked to independent placements, unregistered alternative provision and transport. Without decisive reform, the number of children and young people with an Education, Health and Care Plan is forecast to rise substantially by 2029, despite a falling 0–25 population.

The reform programme is therefore focused on shifting the system upstream: strengthening earlier help, improving ordinarily available inclusive provision, expanding local specialist capacity, and ensuring families can access advice and support before needs escalate. This is intended to improve outcomes for children and young people while also reducing avoidable demand and improving value for money.

- **The case for change is urgent:** demand for EHCPs, specialist placements and high-cost provision is rising, creating increasing pressure on children, families, schools and the High Needs Block.
- **The strategic response is clear:** reforms will build a more inclusive 0–25 system, with stronger local partnerships and more children having their needs met closer to home.
- **Earlier support is central:** the universal offer, self-assessment, cluster consultation and Experts at Hand model will provide practical routes to specialist advice and reduce reliance on statutory pathways.
- **Local sufficiency must grow:** support bases, specialist bases and capital adaptations will expand the continuum of local provision and reduce dependence on independent and non-maintained specialist placements.
- **Workforce capability is a key enabler:** mainstream and specialist settings will be supported to identify need earlier, respond consistently and embed evidence-informed inclusive practice.
- **Family confidence must improve:** clearer communication, co-production, youth voice and more consistent practice across education settings will be essential to rebuilding trust in the local offer.
- **Financial sustainability depends on reform:** slowing growth in high-cost placements, alternative provision and transport will be critical to stabilising the High Needs Block and improving value for money.
- **Impact will be tracked through clear metrics:** reduced EHC needs assessment requests against forecast, increased local capacity, fewer high-cost placements than projected, and quarterly monitoring of expenditure and deficit trajectories.

Significantly, this is both an improvement and sustainability agenda: the reforms are designed to secure better experiences and outcomes for children and families, while creating a more coherent, inclusive and financially sustainable local SEND system.

We have:

- EHE strategy rolled out, and becoming embedded across the partnership, including health, the police and youth services, which is resulting in reductions in EHE (in the context of a national increase)
- Strengthened engagement and interface with the SENCO forum, the school leaders with responsibility for SEND with 100% of all settings attending and positive feedback received. Education representation on the SENDAP Partnership Board is being strengthened through SENCO representation following a successful 'recruitment' campaign, which led to numerous requests to join
- Ongoing focus on building and supporting relationship with the Parent Carer Forum, a DfE funded group of parents. The group, based in Roberts Street hold regular coffee mornings for parents of children with SEND and offer information, advice and guidance
- Developed the multi-agency audit process for SEND and EHCPs and increased leadership and management oversight across Children's Services through the education assurance meeting to focus on increased oversight and the associated service improvements
- Alternative Provision review project underway to develop a new local model and approach, including reviewing the current offer to include outreach specialist support for those children at risk of suspension and exclusion aimed at supporting children to remain in mainstream education
- Taking mitigating actions following the migration of the EHCP system and hub with increased service capacity
- Refresh and refinement of the 'Local Offer', the statutory website offering advice and guidance for parents, children and professionals around SEND and consultation activity underway on the 'new look' and accessibility / functionality to ensure it is user friendly
- Education Mental Health Support Teams offered by Compass Go in every school in our borough supporting children, parents and professionals with mild to moderate mental health needs

5.1.10 Role of education in youth justice and the impact

- Children involved with the Youth Justice Service often have complex educational histories. Many have Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and/or Speech, Language and Communication Needs, which can sometimes be overlooked when behaviour is the primary concern. More than half of children open to YJS have identified SEND and/or speech and language difficulties
- There is a clear link between involvement with Youth Justice Services and higher rates of school exclusion and suspension, so good educational engagement improves life chances, supports positive identities and reduces vulnerability
- To support this group of children, Education leaders are represented on the North East Lincolnshire Youth Justice Board, a dedicated Education Subgroup has been established to oversee educational outcomes for children open to YJS and monthly reviews monitor Education, Employment and Training (EET) status and provide oversight of every child open to the service, with impact evidenced

through:

- The number of children where education is considered unsuitable is reducing.
- Multi-agency working is becoming stronger and more coordinated.
- The number of electively home educated children open to YJS has reduced by 80% since summer 2025.
- SEND needs are being identified more effectively
- More targeted support is being provided at the right time, more coordinated response to some of the area's most vulnerable children and young people

5.1.11 Update on the review of Alternative Provision

- A new Alternative Provision Lead was appointed in April 2026, bringing extensive leadership experience from primary headship to strengthen strategic oversight and delivery of the AP programme
- The project is fully on track to be operational by September 2027 as planned
- Extensive insights work has been completed across all sectors, including mainstream schools, alternative provisions, children and families, and wider professional services. These findings are directly informing the design of the future AP model
- This model will be shaped in line with the direction of SEND reforms, positioning AP as an early intervention and inclusion tool within a three-tier graduated response, rather than as a separate pathway or endpoint for children whose needs have not been met elsewhere. A strong focus on early intervention, ordinarily available provision, and the effective use of external services to support mainstream settings will be central to this approach with the aim of reducing exclusions and improving outcomes for children and young people
- Work is progressing at pace to define the future commissioned offer, with the aim of commencing pre-market engagement in the autumn term and going out to tender by January 2027

5.1.12 Update on Elective Home Education

- The number of children educated at home are reduced by 3.8% as at the end of May 2026 compared to May of 2025. Whilst the aim is always to return children to mainstream education whenever possible, for those with an EHCP this can result in the need for specialist provision which is often independent
- The EHE Team consists of three qualified teachers. Annual reviews are at 97%, with enforcement used as a last resort for children who are not receiving a suitable education
- The EHE Team are working proactively with Public Health to support the uptake of essential vaccinations to improve health outcomes for children educated at home, as data presented to Scrutiny earlier in 2026 demonstrated that there is a very low uptake of vaccinations for this cohort of children
- Given the prevalence of mental health being cited as a reason for parents

electing to home educate, it is noted that EHE children are proportionately represented in CompassGo case figures as accessing our commissioned Education Mental Health Support Teams

5.1.13 Update on SEMH school

This is a DfE led project to deliver a new 150 place specialist free school with a focus on social, emotional, mental health needs. Since confirming NELC decision, the DfE have provided an indicative revised programme, which identifies:

- Redesign and feasibility completion Nov 2026
- May 29 estimated completion for September 2029 opening

Further updates will be provided as project recommences.

5.1.14 SEND System

The move from IDOX to SystemC was part of the wider Children's Services Platform project. The aim was to replace separate and limited systems with a more joined-up platform that could better support EHCP processes, statutory reporting, portal access and future service improvement.

The former IDOX system could not be migrated directly into SystemC in a structured way. This was because much of the historic information was held in PDFs, fields were not always mandatory, records were inconsistent, and the system did not support reliable extraction of all required data. A manual migration approach was therefore agreed with the service and approved through the Children's Data and Systems Group.

By March 2026, 2,789 EHC plans had been moved into SystemC. Historic documents from IDOX were retained in a secure read-only SharePoint location so that previous information remains accessible when needed.

Key points:

- The move to SystemC was a planned and governed project decision, not an unplanned system change
- The approach prioritised statutory continuity and accuracy over speed
- Core statutory EHCP information was prioritised during migration, reducing risk to statutory oversight
- Current issues are a combination of historic IDOX data quality, manual migration limitations, service process changes and some system configuration matters
- Not all issues should be treated as defects in the new system; some relate to data ownership, relationship linking, portal setup and operational practice
- External audit has reviewed the implementation and provided a satisfactory assurance opinion

Current risks and improvement activity:

The main areas requiring continued attention are data quality, parent and school portal access, external user access, reporting accuracy, review date calculations, transfer-in processes and consistent use of the system by services and partners.

Improvement work is already under way. This includes targeted data cleansing, dashboard reporting, updated guidance, training for internal and external users, SENCO drop-in sessions, process changes, supplier engagement and clearer escalation routes between Children's Services, ICT & Digital and SystemC.

The key assurance message is that the system is now live and operational, but further work is needed to strengthen data completeness, improve user confidence and ensure the platform consistently supports statutory, operational and inspection requirements. Officers have been deployed to support the improvement, including Specific Points of Contact (SPOCs) for parents and a comms plan to ensure partners are aware of the improvements. Oversight of each of the elements has been pulled together into an overarching Transformation Plan.

Next Steps:

1. Maintain a single improvement plan with clear ownership across Children's Services, ICT & Digital and SystemC.
2. Continue targeted data cleansing, focusing first on areas that affect statutory oversight, portal access, reporting and case progression.
3. Use dashboard reporting to track progress, identify priority cases and provide regular assurance to governance boards.
4. Complete priority process fixes, including review dates, transfer-in arrangements, SEN2 reporting and year-group transition information.
5. Keep training and guidance up to date for internal teams, schools, providers, health colleagues and other external users, most crucially, our parents and families.
6. Strengthen communication so leaders, staff and partners understand the difference between system defects, historic data issues and service process issues.
7. Provide regular progress updates through the relevant Children's Services and ICT & Digital governance routes.

SEND Sufficiency

Local Authority cumulative DSG overspend comparison:

Authority	2022/23 £m	2023/24 £m	2024/25 £m	2025/26* £m	Previous DfE Support
North Lincolnshire	6.9	7.0	4.4	(5.4)	
Lincolnshire	16.0	16.3	1.8	(25.0)	
North East Lincolnshire	(1.5)	(4.0)	(12.0)	(27.5)	DBV
Hull	(3.5)	(3.5)	(8.5)	Not available	DBV
East Riding	(14.9)	(23.4)	(38.2)	Not available	DBV
Barnsley				(19.3)	SV
Doncaster	(19.8)	(25.3)	(37.6)	(50.9)	DBV
Rotherham				(2.9)	SV

Delivering Better Value (DBV): Government support to help councils improve SEND services and minimise future DSG overspend.

Safety Valve (SV): Government funding provided to help councils tackle large DSG deficits, in return for delivering a recovery plan

Sufficiency pressures remain acute. Current demand indicates 104 children requiring specialist provision across identified primary areas of need, with the greatest pressure in SEMH and SLCN, each accounting for 42 children and together representing the majority of known demand. This aligns with the wider sufficiency position: North East Lincolnshire requires 1,089 specialist placements but has 671 available, leaving a significant gap which is contributing to 225 children awaiting specialist provision, 197 children attending schools outside the borough and 156 children accessing unregistered alternative provision while an appropriate place is secured. The local independent sector is not currently able to absorb this demand at scale, with almost 300 consultations for 81 children since April resulting in only one positive response, reinforcing the need to expand suitable local specialist capacity, particularly for SEMH and SLCN need.

SEND transport – costs and opportunities

There are two sets of statutory guidance pertaining to education transport, one for children of compulsory school age and one for post 16. 950 Children/young adults are currently accessing education transport – 123 of those children are post 16 and 28 are on EOTAS packages (Educated other than at school) 205 different journeys are made each day, travelling to 74 provisions. The vast majority of children (531), qualify on the grounds of their SEND. The longest distance we currently undertake is to William Henry Smith, Brighouse, this is twice a week, Monday and Friday as the student is a weekly boarder. Local authorities **must** publish their school travel policy for children of compulsory school age and post 16, on their website. [School transport | NELC](#)

5.2 Response to and preparedness for national reforms

As part of our ongoing improvement and transformation programme, we remain focused on national policy drivers, which have and will continue to shape and influence the shape and structure of our services, and our direction of travel.

We have established transformation capacity to lead on responding to, designing and delivering the reforms, and clarity around governance and reporting. In response to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill. This includes:

Families First Partnership Programme (overarching)

- Work plan in place in response to the newly published Families First Partnership Programme guidance which sets out clear quarterly milestones for the duration of 2026/26.
- This will result in a place-based approach to the NEL response to the FFP reforms, and evidence of whole partnership engagement and contributions to the co-design and delivery.
- We are on target for implementation.

Family Group Decision Making (Families First)

- We have delivered a workforce training programme (roll out commenced in May 2026, with around 130 people engaged in the training to date, with a further plan to develop a train the trainer approach, and then wider roll out across Children's Services staff and the wider workforce)
- Practice guidance, systems, policies and processes are developed and shared across the workforce
- Recruited to additional capacity in relation to Family Group Conferencing

Family Help (Families First)

- Seven family hubs anchor the locality model, delivering universal, universal plus, targeted and specialist services across four localities
- Work is progressing to explore workforce roles, skills mix, training and responsibilities
- Scoping for test and learn pilot being progressed focusing on integrated multi agency locality working
- The developments will create capacity across the system to meet need at the lowest point, preventing the need for escalation to statutory services

Multi Agency Child Protection Teams (Families First)

- We are building on the strength of the Integrated Front Door
- A draft Multi Agency Child Protection Teams practice model has been developed and is being refined to align with the Family Help model for seamless whole system delivery
- Police and Health Families First Partnership programme transformation leads are guiding decision makers across police and health respectively
- This will have a positive impact on strengthened arrangements to respond to children in need of protection

From a Youth Justice Reforms perspective, we are further embedding 'Child First' approach across the partnership workforce. In addition, we are focussing on knife crime initiatives and local arrangements and support. We are also further exploring the scope of the reforms and working group arrangements being established to drive forward collaborative action.

6 CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no implications.

7 PUBLIC HEALTH, HEALTH INEQUALITIES AND MARMOT IMPLICATIONS

The work across Children's Services does link into the NEL as a Marmot place workstream where appropriate, though there are no direct implications associated with this report.

8 MONITORING COMMENTS

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.

9 WARD IMPLICATIONS

All wards impacted

10 BACKGROUND PAPERS

None

11 CONTACT OFFICER(S)

Ann-Marie Matson, Director of Children's Services

ANN-MARIE MATSON

DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

APPENDIX 1: Performance headlines

Across headline key metrics, performance trajectories have improved (as at end March 2026), compared to 2021/22, as follows:

Measures	Where we were (2021/22)	Where we were (June 2025) (at point of ILACS)	Where we are now (June 2026)	Impact
Workforce - agency staff	90 agency staff (October 2022)	16 agency staff (May 2025)	5 front line case holding agency social workers	Transformed the workforce to move to a permanent team across all areas. The significantly increased stability of the workforce helps, supports and protects children, young people and families, ensuring consistency of practice and enhanced confidence across the partnership
% front line practitioners who are permanent	25%	88% (May 2025)	92%	Children benefit from having the same worker, not having to repeat their story and developing meaningful relationships.
Unallocated cases	166	0	0	All children have an identified social worker
Average caseloads	26	22	23	Average caseloads remains generally stable, and there is management oversight and decision making to manage the complexities within the workloads. There remains an intent for it to be reduced with further recruitment activity, and timely case closures (where appropriate)
Numbers of contacts to the IFD per month	1188	916	883	The threshold document is having a positive impact on partner decision making, and children's needs are being addressed earlier Overall, families are benefitting from earlier help without the need for statutory intervention. Agencies are clear regarding their role and the role of social workers and the continuity, shared understanding and consistency means services are targeted to where they are needed ¹
Numbers of referrals per month	291	220	165	More children are having their needs met earlier. the number of referrals to the Integrated Front

Measures	Where we were (2021/22)	Where we were (June 2025) (at point of ILACS)	Where we are now (June 2026)	Impact
				Door has decreased overall. There has been a sharpened focus across the workforce and the partnership in identifying and appropriately responding to neglect and sexual harm (both intra familial abuse and harm outside the home). Through audit activity, referrals are more appropriate and in line with the threshold document
Re-referrals %	29%	14% YTD	19%	Children and families are now more likely to access appropriate support and intervention to reduce the need for re-referral to children's social care
Assessment timeliness %	68%	95% YTD	93%	Children and families needs are being assessed in a timelier manner.
Numbers of children in need	2415	1919	1774	As a result of practice being aligned with the refreshed threshold document, there has been a positive impact on partner decision making, and children's needs are being appropriately identified and intervention aligned. There is a sharpened focus on the timeliness of closures and meaningfulness of intervention in effecting change more swiftly which continues to be consistently embedded. There has been a recent increase in children in need following the increase in referrals aligned to the partnership focus on identifying risk and need appropriately

Measures	Where we were (2021/22)	Where we were (June 2025) (at point of ILACS)	Where we are now (June 2026)	Impact
Numbers of children on a child protection plan	353	191	245	There has been a recent increase in children in need of protection, this is in the context of an overall reduction and the rate of children starting child protection plans being in line with stat neighbours/England average. There has been a sharpened focus across the workforce and partnership on identification and responding to neglect and sexual abuse (both intrafamilial and harm outside the home). This has included a revision and relaunch of the strategies and a roll out of training and the development of the RAF. There continues to be a sharpened focus on supporting children to be in their family, with a strengthened focus on meaningful intervention, relational approaches and family decision. This has enhanced the approach of child protection and PLO as a vehicle to effecting meaningful change and led to a reduction in children needing to enter care. There has been external scrutiny of children on a child protection plan to ensure thresholds continue to appropriate and proportionately aligned to risk and there remains a focus in ensuring children step down timely and proportionately
Timeliness of cases in Public Law Outline	79 weeks (December 2023)	24.68 weeks	30 weeks	We have significantly improved the effectiveness of Public Law Outline in diverting children from court and where public proceedings are required for children, these are now concluded much timelier.
No. Of families in proceedings	115 (2022)	32	35	Due to the sharpened focus on intervention being provided early and PLO as an intervention to

Measures	Where we were (2021/22)	Where we were (June 2025) (at point of ILACS)	Where we are now (June 2026)	Impact
				effect change, significantly more children are enabled to remain with their family with the help they need and fewer children are entering public law.
Numbers of children in our care	629	415	411	The sharpened partnership focus on intervention within CP and PLO to prevent children entering care and the strengthened decision making systems have enabled more children to remain within their family and fewer children needing to enter our care. More children are being safely returned home to their families, or finding alternative permanency; and through earlier intervention, we are reducing the need for children to enter care.
Children's Homes inspection outcomes	4 Good 3 Requires Improvement	6 Good 1 Requires Improvement (inspection due)	5 Good 1 Requires Improvement 1 Inadequate (subject to compliance and improvement plan in place)	There is a continued commitment to ensure compliance with regulatory standards, and to ensure the quality of care planning, in a context of love and care in our home settings. Where actions are identified, there is strong oversight and a collaborative approach to ensuring a robust response and offer.
Timeliness of Foster Carer Supervision	14%	100%	98%	Overall, foster carers are better supported to help, support and protect the children they care for.
Timeliness of Kinship Carers Supervision	59%	100%	98%	Overall, kinship carers are better supported to help, support and protect the children they care for.
Timeliness of Foster Carer Visits	68%	99%	100%	Through improving compliance, foster carers are better supported to help, support and protect the children they care for.
Timeliness of Kinship Carer Visits	85%	96%	98%	Through compliance and monitoring, kinship carers are better supported to help, support and protect the children they care for.

Measures	Where we were (2021/22)	Where we were (June 2025) (at point of ILACS)	Where we are now (June 2026)	Impact
				The two visits that aren't undertaken are due to exceptional circumstances
Foster Carer enquiries	45 (full year)	24 YTD (April to June 2025)	25	Through our fostering friendly campaign with schools and businesses, and raising awareness, we have significantly increased the numbers of foster carers, with projections to increase further over 2025/26, enabling children to live in their local families, attend their local schools and improve outcomes for children
Number of Assessments approved at Panel	3	4 YTD	6	A further 12 carers are currently being assessed. It is anticipated that there will be at least 16 carers approved this year