

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Debbie Barnes
Director of Children's Services
Lincolnshire County Council
County Hall
Newland
Lincoln
LN1 1YQ

Dear Debbie

Focused visit to Lincolnshire children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Lincolnshire children's services on 17 April 2018. The inspectors were Caroline Walsh, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Joy Howick, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors evaluated the local authority's arrangements for permanency planning and achieving permanence for children in care.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including discussions with social workers, senior managers and Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs). They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

Overview

Leaders are ambitious for children in care. They know their services and prioritise resources to support social work to flourish. This results in stable and experienced teams who deliver high-quality social work which improves outcomes for children in Lincolnshire. Child-focused practice ensures that children are able to contribute and engage in their planning. Good-quality direct work with children is helping them make sense of their life experiences. Strong use of children's networks of family and friends results in a high proportion of children appropriately leaving care through special guardianship.

When children's circumstances change, a few children experience delay in being provided with permanent new homes and families. Children are supported to return home when circumstances allow. For the few children subject to care orders and

placed with parents, authorisation is not always clearly recorded and these placements, while adequately supported, are not reviewed sufficiently. As a result, some placements continue for long periods without it being clear whether they remain in children's best interests. Children maintain contact with people important to them, but known potential risks are not always considered in risk assessments.

The electronic case recording system is slow and does not necessarily support effective practice. Leaders need to do more to ensure that learning from children's experiences consistently informs their individual planning and contributes to service development.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Some children wait too long for their permanence plans to be progressed. This affects a small group of children with long-term fostering plans who wait too long for assessments to be completed. Also, some children cared for by family and friends experience delay when circumstances mean that they have to move. The lack of detail in the decisions recorded when permanence plans are made, as well as weaker contingency planning, creates uncertainty for these few children whose original plans change.
- Practice for children subject to care orders who are placed with their parents is not well understood. Authorisations are not clearly recorded and although there is adequate support for these children, reviews do not robustly consider whether the arrangements continue to be suitable. These arrangements have been long-standing for a small group of children.
- The electronic recording system for children's social care is slow, with documents difficult to locate, and this makes it harder to see children's journeys.
- Quality assurance systems do not capture the learning when children have unplanned endings or experience delays in achieving permanence, in order to inform future service development.

Findings

- Children benefit from trusting relationships with their social workers, who know them well. Social workers make good use of opportunities to see children in a variety of situations (including when they are spending time with family), helping them to understand children's experiences. Sensitive, age-appropriate direct work is used well to explore children's wishes and feelings.
- Most children's care plans are coherent, outcome focused and measurable. They are informed by good-quality assessments that support child-focused planning. Care plans are updated as children's needs change. Children's sense of identity, and particularly consideration of their experiences as children growing up in care, is less well represented in written records.
- Children's contact arrangements with families support them to retain their important relationships. Risk assessments for contact arrangements are not

updated regularly enough, which means that not all risks are fully understood by those supporting contact.

- Most children benefit from stable homes, with the majority of children living with foster carers recruited and supported by Lincolnshire council. Social workers work well together to assess, train and support foster carers to care for their children. Good use is made of resources, including early help and placement support workers, which contributes to positive stability for most children.
- Foster carers' relationships with children are carefully considered in matching decisions. Permanence panel provides appropriate oversight of these decisions and offers an opportunity for children to directly convey their wishes. A few children wait too long to be permanently matched. This delay does not support children to feel secure and occasionally delays the commencement of life-story work.
- Senior leaders promote a strong focus on supporting children to remain with their connected networks. Family group conferences are used well to enable families to identify their own strengths and family-based solutions. High-quality viability assessments lead to the identification of family and friends who are appropriately supported by the specialist kinship team. A lack of clarity in the process which led to delays in the approval of Regulation 24 assessments at fostering panel has recently been addressed by senior managers.
- Assessments of special guardians are comprehensive and appropriately consider children's longer-term needs. Financial support is properly considered to ensure that there are no barriers which would prevent families and friends from making a permanent commitment to children. Increasingly, the adoption support fund and expertise of the post-adoption support team is being used to support special guardians in caring for their children.
- IROs regularly review children's planning at well-attended multi-agency meetings. Their commitment to making these more meaningful for children has resulted in high-quality child-friendly minutes that are written to children to help them understand and contribute to their care journeys.
- IROs focus appropriately on children's permanence plans and the majority of these are outlined at the second review. However, the local authority is aware that, where things do not go to plan, contingency planning does not consider alternative options clearly enough, which leads to uncertainty and delay for a small number of children.
- Children are supported to return home to the care of their parents as appropriate. However, there is a poor application of placement with parents' regulations, and a small group of children have not had their arrangements robustly reviewed.
- The local authority is aware that care proceedings take too long. There is currently an average duration of 39 weeks. There have been capacity issues in

the courts. Consequently, it is taking too long for children to have their adoptions finalised and permanence is delayed. Senior leaders have taken assertive action, but it is too early to see the impact of this.

- Children's voices are well represented throughout the work of the local authority. The creation of 'Supportive Superstars', a peer support group for children of fostering families, is an example of ambitious practice to ensure that all children's voices matter, including the children of foster carers. Children's views resulted in activities to help children of fostering families make sense of decision-making and to address their needs when fostered children move on.
- The local authority successfully promotes its corporate parenting responsibilities. A stable and committed political and senior leadership team challenges low aspirations for children in care. Resources are appropriately prioritised and innovative strategic planning has resulted in a joint approach to meeting children's needs with schools, health services and wider partners. Outcomes include lower school exclusion rates, the development of 'healthy minds' to meet lower level emotional needs of children and the development of the Caring2Learn project. This is successfully engaging foster carers in children's education and has resulted in over 60 schools participating in this pilot to promote children's learning.
- Learning from audits and external peer reviews supports improvements in practice but there is more to do to ensure that learning from children's experiences informs their future care planning. Unplanned endings and disruptions, or long delays to achieving permanence, provide opportunities for learning. Developing systems for capturing this to inform future service development is an area for improvement.
- Senior leaders provide a good working environment to support social work to flourish. Manageable workloads, regular supervision and appropriate training and development opportunities contribute to a supportive environment for social workers who are committed to working for Lincolnshire. Investment in an ambitious electronic child case recording system is bringing together children's records, but further work is needed to ensure that the system is effective.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning your next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Caroline Walsh
Her Majesty's Inspector