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Mick Gibbs,
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Dear Mick,

Focused visit to North Lincolnshire local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to North Lincolnshire local authority children's services on 6 March 2019. The visit was carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectors Matt Reed and Rachel Holden.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for the front door.

Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers, practice supervisors and an observation of a multi-agency strategy discussion. They also looked at children's case records, and local authority performance management and quality assurance information.

Overview

Since the last inspection in 2017, where North Lincolnshire was judged good in help and protection and outstanding overall, the local authority has strengthened practice further at the front door. Additional management capacity is facilitating clear, consistently robust and timely decisions throughout the initial stages of a family's involvement with children's services. Thresholds are well understood, and children and families receive support in accordance with their needs at the earliest opportunity. Performance is managed effectively, and a clear quality assurance framework enables a good focus on the quality of the work rather than a focus solely on process and timescales.

There is an emphasis on supporting families to find solutions to their own problems and to manage involvement appropriately at the lowest level of intervention. This ethos is well understood by a stable workforce. A purposeful strategy of engaging partners in changing the narrative so that families are supported at an early stage has promoted positive relationships and is increasing partners' confidence to manage cases appropriately at a lower level.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The quality of information shared by partner agencies at strategy discussions.
- Recording of personal supervision for case holding social workers.

Findings

- At the last inspection in 2017, decision-making at the front door was considered an area of practice that could be strengthened further. Since that time, there has been a continued commitment to ensuring front door services are improved further to enable families to receive the right response at the earliest opportunity. A purposeful strategy to engage with partners has strengthened relationships, as well as their confidence to manage situations at a lower level, thus preventing the need for statutory interventions. A stable workforce, across children's services, has supported continuity and consistency of practice.
- Performance is managed effectively so that families receive a service that is timely and in accordance with their needs. A clear and robust quality assurance framework ensures that the quality of the work and decision-making is considered, as well as a focus on process and timescales. Thematic reports and oversight by leaders at all levels of the organisation ensure that areas for improvement are highlighted and acted on appropriately in order to improve the quality of service provision.
- There is consistently strong decision-making throughout the early stages of a family's involvement with children's services. Practice supervisors within the single access point (SAP) and in the integrated multi-agency partnership (IMAP) give clear direction on how to proceed, and the rationale for decisions are clearly recorded. Frequent oversight of work within the teams throughout the day ensures that decisions are made in a timely way and that families receive a service without delay.
- Issues of consent and thresholds are well understood. Effective information-sharing, including consultation with families, enables proportionate decisions to be made, and families are signposted to the most appropriate service. There are good relationships with partner agencies, who understand the ethos of encouraging families to find their own solutions. Partners actively take the role of

lead professional to support families and manage situations within early help to prevent escalation into statutory services.

- Low- and medium-risk domestic abuse referrals receive appropriate oversight to ensure that risk assessment and response are robust. Additional checks are completed when needed, and multi-agency attendance at weekly triage meetings enables a wider consideration of support that could be offered to prevent matters from escalating.
- Children who require a statutory intervention are escalated appropriately to IMAP for further checks and consideration of assessment without delay. When children are at risk of harm, strategy meetings are timely and well attended, and there are clear actions recorded to facilitate a robust response to concerns. However, in some meetings, partners have not brought up-to-date information to support the overall decision-making. While this did not have an impact in terms of response to immediately protect children, it has the potential to reduce the effectiveness of safety planning.
- Children's services assessments, including S47 investigations are detailed and completed in a timescale that is right for the child. Clear and regular management oversight of assessments prevents delays. Families receive support, in most cases quickly, enabling interventions to occur while the assessment is ongoing, reducing the need for longer-term social work involvement. Re-referral rates are low, and the majority of families are not subjected to multiple interventions.
- At times, overly detailed written assessments can mean that the child's needs and presenting issues can get lost. While this does not affect the overall analysis, nor the outcome, in some cases it may make it difficult for families and the professionals involved to understand the nature of concerns and reasons for involvement.
- The use of the North Lincolnshire risk assessment framework was evident in cases sampled. The framework highlights the presenting risks and protective factors well to inform the overall analysis and decision-making. Decisions to step down to early help or escalate into child protection processes following assessment are appropriate, ensuring that children and families receive services which are commensurate with their level of need.
- Decisions made to accommodate children are in accordance with their need and presenting risk. Emergency action is not taken unnecessarily and there is a low use of police protection powers. Where police protection powers have been utilised, there is clear liaison with the police to enable effective follow up, and children are not left in situations of unassessed vulnerability.
- Staff turnover is low and currently all staff are in permanent positions, the majority having over three years' experience. In the supervision files seen, not all reflected the level of one-to-one personal supervision that is advocated within the

local authority's supervision policy. However, staff report being well supported, and the workers spoken to were positive about their experiences of working for North Lincolnshire. Workers are encouraged and enabled to access appropriate training, which promotes their continued professional development and influences the way that they work with children.

Ofsted will share the findings from this focused visit with the Department for Education and take these into account when planning your next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Matt Reed
Her Majesty's Inspector