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Dear Ms Arthey

Focused visit to North East Lincolnshire children's services

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic.

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to North East Lincolnshire children's services on 5 and 6 May 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors were Louise Hollick, Neil Penswick, Tara Geere, Vicky Metherringham and Chris Smith.

The methodology for this visit was in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. However, the delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. This visit was carried out by remote means. The inspectors used video calls for discussions with local authority staff. The lead inspector and the director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

Senior leaders in North East Lincolnshire have needed to instigate widespread organisational changes to children's social care services. This followed the last focused visit in December 2019 when significant weaknesses in the quality of services for children were found. While much progress has been made against the areas for priority action identified in May and December 2019 regarding the quality and effectiveness of assessment, planning and supervision, some weaknesses in practice remain. In addition to the existing areas for priority action, the following areas for improvement have been identified at this visit:

- the sufficiency and stability of the social care workforce, so that children experience fewer changes of social worker
- social worker caseloads, to enable social workers to carry out purposeful direct work with children and help to effect change for children and their families.

Findings

- North East Lincolnshire had relatively low rates of infection during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, but rates were higher in the second wave from autumn 2020. The national lockdowns, virtual working and the increased demands brought about by the pandemic have made it particularly challenging for the new senior leadership team to get alongside staff and drive cultural and organisational change. The pace of change has therefore been slower than planned.
- Children and families receive a prompt and proportionate response to initial contacts made to the integrated 'front door' service. Early help services have been realigned so that children and families can access early support more easily. Contacts are screened by managers in a timely way and appropriate management direction is both given and recorded based on the risks and the impact on the child. The child's presentation, family history, risks and strengths are all considered to ensure that the right decision is made to support and protect the child. At present, there is no live information-sharing by partners and therefore agency checks have to be formally requested. This slows the screening process down and has potential to impact on timely decision-making for children.
- When children are at risk of harm, strategy meetings and section 47 enquiries are timely, ensuring prompt multi-agency information-sharing and response. Children are routinely spoken to as part of section 47 enquiries; thus, the voice of the child is at the centre of decision-making.
- The quality of children's assessments is variable. Timescales have improved since the last focused visit so that more children receive a well-timed assessment according to their needs. The views of the children and parents are considered, and children's experiences are reflected in the decision-making for next steps. This is enabling a more collaborative process for children and families. Some assessments lack detailed and pertinent information from other agencies who know the children. This prevents a broad understanding of the child's experiences and informed management of risk and need.
- Children in need of help and protection are being visited at home by their social worker. During the pandemic, a risk stratification tool has been used to assess and prioritise visits to the most vulnerable children. This has ensured that they are visited at a frequency that meets their needs. Most of these visits are face to face and children are seen alone when appropriate. Children are also engaged in direct work with their social workers. This assists in relationship building and helps social workers understand children's experiences.

- Child protection planning for children is inconsistent. There is an improvement in the timeliness of child protection conferences and most children's plans are regularly reviewed in multi-agency core-group meetings. Plans are often task-orientated and lack a focus on the changes required to drive improvements for children's experiences. As a result, children do not always make progress and there is evidence of drift and delay for some children.
- When children are at risk of exploitation or go missing, there is a clear process to ensure that their risks are assessed and reviewed. Managers and their respective teams have a good knowledge of contextual safeguarding and are professionally curious. There are examples of innovative work to raise awareness of young people at risk in the community, but not all plans contain good enough action planning to make sure that operational staff know what they have to do, by when and when to review.
- For children and young people subject to pre-proceedings under the Public Law Outline (PLO), there has been a focused plan for practice improvement. Stronger legal gateway meetings and more robust management oversight of these children are ensuring tighter governance of PLO planning and helping to reduce the number of children subject to court proceedings. Letters before proceedings have been revamped and are written sensitively and clearly and encourage parents to take part in the process. This is helping to improve parental engagement. There is early identification of family members for viability assessments, parenting assessments and drug and alcohol testing. All of this helps to avoid delay for these children and assists with contingency plans should children need alternative care.
- Leaders have improved governance for children who need to be brought into care. There are new panel processes, including a legal gateway panel, a placement panel and a 16+ panel to assess risk and endorse decision-making. This is ensuring better oversight of children and slowly reducing the overall numbers of children in care. For most children in care, there is good consideration of their needs and wishes and appropriate matching of placements.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on the availability of short-break services for children with complex needs and disabilities. The short-term respite provision was closed on the advice of Public Health England during the pandemic and outreach services stopped. Disabled children's needs were risk-assessed and they were visited when appropriate, but there was an impact on families having reduced access to support at a very difficult time in their lives.
- Children in care have been able to maintain links with their families despite the government restrictions. Family time is prioritised and takes place face to face whenever it is safe to do so, supported by video and phone contact.
- Children in care have timely access to health assessments and consideration is given to meeting their physical and mental health needs. When COVID-19 has impacted on face-to-face appointments, access to therapeutic support has been maintained virtually where required. There has been a considerable drop in the

number of dental appointments for children in care during the pandemic due to the closure of dental practices. There is a plan in place to address this through priority appointments and weekend opening now that dentists have reopened.

- Personal education plans for children in care are variable in quality with not enough focus on education targets. This is particularly important now, as many children have considerable gaps in their knowledge caused by disruption to their education.
- Care leavers have been supported throughout the pandemic and are visited regularly. Personal advisers have maintained strong and meaningful relationships with young people and provided additional support, including help with their emotional health and well-being when required.
- The partnership between social care and schools has strengthened over the last year. Schools report that better partnership working is being sustained. A sharp focus on the safety of the most vulnerable pupils is being maintained as normal schooling is returning. Children's services have effective systems in place to track children moving into elective home education (EHE). Although numbers in EHE have risen sharply, systems are ensuring that more vulnerable children are monitored closely. Similarly, tenacious efforts are made to locate children who go missing from education.
- North East Lincolnshire now has a permanent director of children's services and a committed senior leadership team whose members have an accurate evaluation of their services. Leaders are more transparent and aware of the areas for improvement. There has been significant corporate interest and financial investment in the service. This is enabling tighter and evidence-informed leadership and management and social work practice is improving, albeit from a low base.
- The systematic monitoring and review of performance data through live dashboards is enabling leaders to identify trends, track progress and create actions for further improvement. There is an established quality assurance and auditing process in place. Audits are identifying themes and directing workforce development and training.
- Children are experiencing multiple changes of social worker. This prevents children developing stable and trusting relationships with their social workers and is a barrier to coherent and timely planning. This was reiterated by the children that inspectors spoke to and was also commented on by partner agencies.
- Caseloads are still too high for some social workers. The message from some staff is that the workload is more manageable than it has been in the past, but in some teams, caseloads are still not at a level that enables social workers to undertake purposeful direct work with children to effect change.
- Supervision and management direction is regular in most cases but the quality is variable across the teams. Supervision is not consistently having an impact to reflect and improve social work practice or drive forward timely planning for all

children. Leaders are aware of the improvements required for operational managers and are planning to deliver face-to-face training and development for managers in line with the relaxation of national COVID-19 restrictions.

- Staff report feeling well supported by visible and approachable senior managers. Managers have supported their teams through the challenges of the pandemic and home working with daily meetings, supervision and good access to IT equipment. Workers are positive about working for North East Lincolnshire. This is an improvement from previous focused visits.
- Leaders have committed significant investment for additional social workers and teams have been restructured so there is additional management support. There is a renewed workforce development strategy and a focus on recruiting experienced permanent staff who want to work in North East Lincolnshire. There have been significant delays and challenges in this due to the uncertainty of the pandemic.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning your next inspection or visit. I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. It will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Louise Hollick
Her Majesty's Inspector