

Inspection of North Lincolnshire local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 10 to 14 October 2022

Lead inspector: Jan Edwards, His Majesty's Inspector

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

Since the last inspection of North Lincolnshire Council in 2017, services for children in care and care leavers, and leadership, have remained outstanding. The experience of children in need of help and protection has improved so that this is now outstanding. This has been achieved by the uncompromising and visionary political and executive leadership and from the leadership of the director of children's services (DCS), who have an unwavering ambition for children and families. This united political and service leadership has successfully fostered a compassionate and caring culture which has become the bedrock of the council and the service.

Children benefit from a consistently high standard of social work practice. The commitment to children as a priority for the council and across the partnership is exemplary. Senior leaders have created a culture in which social work has flourished. It is based on the importance of relationships, and of promoting children's sense of being loved and cared for.

The leadership team demonstrated significant agility during the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders adapted to and implemented their response to the pandemic while also giving continued focus to service development and innovation. They also ensured, in collaboration with the safeguarding partnership, a focus on the emotional well-being of children and care leavers, their foster carers, families and the whole workforce.

What needs to improve?

There are an extremely small number of areas of variability in what is otherwise an exceptional practice. Senior leaders have an accurate understanding of the service and continuously drive for innovation and improvement. The routine scrutiny and challenge, in conjunction with the established quality assurance framework, informs the relevant plans for addressing the issue of variability in practice across the service.

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

1. Children in need of help and protection are provided the right help when they need it. There is a determined focus, embodied in the local authority's 'One Family Approach', on empowering families to find their own solutions. When this is not always possible and families need additional help and support, the 'fewest and best' interventions are delivered by the most appropriate professional who knows the family.
2. Children and families are supported effectively in order to build resilience through a wide-ranging early help offer, which is making a real difference for children. Early help assessments identify the range of the child's needs well, which then results in a clear and detailed plan. This means that children receive meaningful interventions from the right services, including community and voluntary organisations. Thresholds for services are understood by all. Targeted services or those agencies who best know the child are identified to support families and appropriately manage a more complex level of need. As a result, partners, notably schools and health professionals, are confident to lead in delivering interventions and the early help plan.
3. Decision-making by the single point of contact team is timely for children. Workers are skilled at recognising safeguarding concerns and promptly escalate to the integrated multi-agency partnership (IMAP) for screening for statutory intervention. This is underpinned by proactive and thorough management support and oversight. When contacts are received in the IMAP, they are responded to swiftly, supported through a live dashboard which makes oversight of timeliness easily visible to managers and practitioners alike. There is a very considered and child-centred response to the triage of contacts, in keeping with the 'fewest and best' approach. Diligent care is taken to identify who has the most significant relationship with a child to ascertain their views. In almost all cases seen, children benefit from timely, proportionate and effective decision-making. This is informed by high-quality information-sharing by a wide range of partner agencies, and a clear understanding of consent and threshold for services. When families and professionals make contact out of hours, the extended hours team ensures that there is a detailed immediate response, with a robust handover to daytime colleagues.

4. When risks to children increase, strategy meetings are swiftly convened. There is excellent partner agency participation, enabling effective information-sharing. This informs appropriate decision-making, safety planning and clear accountability for actions agreed, leading to appropriately focused section 47 child protection enquiries. These enquiries are child-focused, and include direct work with the child to explore the issues, the clear views of the relevant adults, and good-quality agency information.
5. Social workers take a whole-family approach when undertaking children's assessments. This means that social workers have a thorough understanding of children's support networks and what life is like for them. The focus on a relational strength-based approach is a powerful element of social work practice in North Lincolnshire. This is ensuring that children and families develop meaningful relationships with their social worker, even when intervention is time-limited. Parents who are benefiting from children in need services or child protection planning told inspectors that support had come at the right time for them. They said that social workers are reliable, that they are helpful, that they went 'above and beyond' and that they did not feel judged.
6. Sensitive work undertaken with children and family members aids the social worker in their understanding of family relationships and of the child's world. Assessments, including those for disabled children, are comprehensive, informing detailed plans. Creative direct work takes place to develop plans that will transition disabled children into adult services, avoiding services stopping and starting.
7. Social workers are strong proponents of 'One Family' and the culture in the service which have a deep-rooted respect for children. Consequently, they are committed to, and tenacious in, building relationships with children, and in undertaking creative and sensitive direct work with them. This limits the numbers of professionals with whom children need to have contact and ensures that they do not have to repeatedly tell their story.
8. When more specialist help is needed, there are a range of services which support children and families with issues such as substance misuse, for their emotional well-being and mental health, and when they live with domestic abuse. These agencies form strong multi-agency networks around the child and family, contributing to comprehensive child in need or child protection plans, which help reduce the risks for children.
9. Children who are identified to be at risk of harm are supported through child protection planning. Child protection conferences are well attended by partner agencies, family members and at times, when appropriate, children. These lead to the development of meaningful plans, enabling children and their families to have clear expectations about what needs to change and how this can be achieved. Child protection plans are overseen and shaped effectively through regular multi-agency meetings with parents and partner agencies, ensuring that

the right support is in place. Often, this leads to children's situations improving and intervention being stepped down to a lower level.

10. Neglect and its impact on children are recognised, resulting in escalation to child protection planning and, when necessary, to the public law outline. Effective work is undertaken in the pre-proceedings stage of the public law outline, including specialist assessments, thus avoiding unnecessary delay for children. The 'court and permanence team' are determined advocates for children, pursuing children's options for permanence with a relentless focus. This means that parents are given opportunities to demonstrate change, but when this is not in the timescale for the child, decisions are made in children's best interests.
11. Private fostering arrangements are robustly managed. Assessments are completed within timescales and all relevant checks undertaken. Visits take place in line with the individually assessed needs of the child and the carers and, in most cases, above the statutory requirements.
12. Where children are at risk of exploitation, there is a strong and swift multi-agency approach to identifying and managing the risk to the child. This includes risks from organised crime gangs, in response to which, effective disruption activities are deployed in the community, including creative, positive activities being offered to children. A range of operations proactively identify and map potential exploitation activity. When children are missing from home or from care, they receive timely return home interviews. Workers sensitively gain the voice of the child and develop an improved understanding of the child's lived experiences. This supports workers to provide effective responses for children, leading to a reduction in the number of episodes of children going missing from home and care taking place.
13. There is a robust process for overseeing children who are electively home educated. Leaders demonstrate their vision of 'One Family' by being ambitious for, and caring about, the children who are electively home educated well beyond the required annual visit. This includes an impressive outreach and inclusion programme aimed at supporting families to provide aspects of the personal development curriculum. Similarly, a robust system for overseeing children missing education, combined with leaders' understanding of the community, ensures that these children remain 'in sight'.
14. The management of allegations against professionals is strong. The local authority designated officer is diligent in pursuing information, and there is effective multi-agency working to promote understanding of the role.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: outstanding

15. Children in the care of North Lincolnshire children's services receive an exceptional service from workers who demonstrate that they care for them. Consequently, children told inspectors that they felt loved and that they felt listened to.
16. Social workers, managers and leaders are ambitious for the children they care for. The decisions to place children into care are appropriate and timely. Timely assessments and decision-making lead to most children, who have more recently come into care, being found homes with their family members, who are well supported to look after children in their care.
17. Social workers create dynamic and responsive assessments and plans for children which are informed directly by what children say. These plans are regularly reviewed and children are encouraged to attend their meetings and to share their views. Children are routinely offered, and take up, the opportunity for an advocate and an independent visitor to ensure that their voice is heard and safeguards are in place for them.
18. When the plan is for children to return home, there is detailed and coordinated work to assess and support the family using a well-evidenced restorative and risk-based approach. The skilled edge of care team offers support to families for children returning home and also for those who may be at risk of coming into care. The service's 'family solutions' approach, which is similar to family group conferencing, supports families to find their own solutions and develop their own network of support. This is supporting children to successfully live at home.
19. Social workers and senior managers are relentless in the pursuit of permanence for children. Independent reviewing officers advocate and challenge effectively on behalf of children. Accordingly, most children are quickly found permanent placements in families. There is timely consideration of adoption for all children. The focus is on knowing children well and seeking the right plans for them. As a result, there has been some success, with a number of older children securing adoptive placements.
20. The local authority is part of a regional adoption agency (RAA), (Family Adoption Links), although leaders have maintained an oversight of all aspects of adoption. This has enabled the service to increase the pool of adopters for children, to improve sufficiency, and has brought the advantages of collaborative working, combining services and the sharing of good practice. Positively, the RAA provides equal support and training for special guardians as it does for its adopters.

21. Most children in care are settled and well looked after in excellent-quality foster homes. Children told inspectors that their foster carers are amazing and that they loved being in foster care. It is tangible that children feel cared for by their carers and quickly feel part of a loving family. This is helping them to make good progress and also have their physical and emotional health needs well met. Foster carers told inspectors that they build strong and trusting relationships with social workers, enabling them to be open and honest during matching or if they need additional support. This is contributing to strong placement stability.
22. The 'One Family' and 'You Say Who' approach is embodied throughout the fostering service and by foster carers so that there is high aspiration for children to have a choice in deciding which family they can live with. As a result, leaders have ensured that children in care live locally and with local authority foster families. This has enabled children to retain important links with family and friends, and care leavers to stay put in their foster homes. There is an equal commitment to ensuring that brothers and sisters stay together in their new homes. Exploration of relationships in 'You Say Who' sessions means that family time is promoted that considers children's attachments and their safety, so that they are benefiting from continuity of these important lifelong relationships.
23. Social workers are highly attuned to children's stories and traumatic experiences, which helps them to create culturally sensitive, detailed life journey work. These are updated as children grow up, which ensures that their stories are accessible and meaningful for them.
24. Educational achievement for children in care is a top priority across the local authority. Leaders set ambitious targets and have a firm grasp of the educational performance of children in care. This high ambition is well supported by the virtual school and underpinned by a high standard of personal education plans.
25. Social workers and leaders listen carefully to children and young people in the development of services, but also in getting it right for them as individuals. This leads to a responsive service, at all levels, and ensures that children are heard and their needs are well met. There are also a wide range of activities and groups that children in care and care leavers highly value as their own peer support. The council, leaders and social workers are exceptionally proud of the children of North Lincolnshire. They celebrate their achievements individually and at a special annual event known as the Awesome Kidz awards.
26. When children leave care, they benefit from an extensive array of support for their practical, physical and emotional health and financial needs. Personal advisers (PAs) are sensitive and professionally curious in their approach to supporting care leavers. They build warm and trusting relationships and they speak openly of their pride in their young people. The work of the PAs, in

conjunction with the breadth of the offer to care leavers, is highly creative in meeting the full range of potential needs of these children and young people.

27. The local authority is an aspirational and ambitious corporate parent that is guided by the principle that 'our children never stop being our children'. This is exemplified in the recent and impressive corporate promise to care leavers, that they can access lifelong all-age support and advice from the council, should they need it. While the all-age promise to care leavers has only recently been formalised, there are a number of older care leavers who have consistently benefited from accessing informal support. One such care leaver spoke very positively and movingly about the difference children's social care had made to her life chances. She told inspectors, 'In times of need, social care saved me,' and said she feels that she had been 'given a second chance to become the person I am today.'
28. Children and young people are actively involved in planning for their future and in reviewing this with their PAs. More recently, pathway planning has been improved to include the direct voice of the child and young person, which ensures greater collaboration and ownership of their plans.
29. Care leavers benefit from the unwavering support of the service and the whole council. Acting as parents would, they use their personal and professional links to secure opportunities for children and care leavers. Leaders have acted with creativity and responsiveness to further support post-16 care leavers. As a result of the actions of the education team in engaging local employers, there has been a reduction in the number of care leavers not in education, employment or training. Leaders from the local authority's special educational needs and/or disabilities team work collaboratively with the post-16 team, as well as social workers and personal advisers, so that support for care leavers is joined up.
30. There is a wide range of council-leased accommodation available to care leavers that meets their needs and provides graduated opportunities for them to learn how to be a responsible tenant, before taking on an independent tenancy. Care leavers are provided with effective safety nets that enable them to move back a step when they need to.

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

31. North Lincolnshire Council and the senior leadership team keep children and their families at the heart of everything they do. Transformational systems leadership has ensured that the whole council, and the partnership, prioritises children. The 'One Family Approach' of the 'fewest and best' intervention is exemplified in the early help and preventative approach and is embedded across the whole service. It is also at the heart of the whole council as effective corporate parents, and most impressively has been embraced by partners.

32. The highly impressive alliance forged between the leader of the council, the lead member for children's services, the chief executive and the DCS has ensured that this high-performing authority has not rested on its laurels. Their single-minded focus has enabled a culture in which children matter and benefit from the corporate care afforded to them by the council.
33. The senior leadership team has been grown from within the service, resulting in highly committed leaders and managers with a deep understanding of the community they serve. The members of the mature and stable team are outward facing, seeking tests of assurance through external review and independent scrutiny. The DCS is an inspiring role model, putting children and her workforce first. She is ambitious for children and for the service and is leading on innovative service development from an authentic value base of care and compassion.
34. The local authority is an outward-looking learning organisation. It has contributed to the work of the independent review of children's social care as one of the 10 local design areas and in the 'call for ideas'. As a result, leaders have established a transformation board, chaired by the DCS, to address reforms and continuous improvement, putting them ahead of the curve. Leaders are also influential across the region, contributing, for example, to the local integrated care system reforms, ensuring that children are central to new models of service delivery, and modelling to other local authorities good practice within the local family justice board.
35. There is a genuine commitment to seeking continuous feedback from children and families, which is consolidated into service development. Children have a clear voice in decisions that affect their lives, ensuring that services are shaped around their needs. Furthermore, leaders are strengthening their approach to listening to the voice and experience of adults who have received services, through dedicated paid roles to provide continuing challenge around co-production.
36. The commitment to listening to children is embodied in 'You Say Who', an approach which ensures that children are asked about those people who are most important to them. This means that children have been able to return home to their family successfully and to reconnect with family members. Consequently, children are helped to feel heard, valued and supported.
37. The local authority's sufficiency duty is firmly rooted in the principles of 'One Council, One family, and One place'. At the core of this approach is the aspiration for children to remain with their families. This is ensuring that children safely stay at home with family or connected people, in their schools and communities, and that children are in the right homes when they have to come into care. The commitment to local 'place'-based homes has translated into the development and expansion of the fostering provision. Impressively,

the council has not used any external fostering placements for children in the last two years.

38. Leaders are determined champions for children, with high aspirations to ensure children's best outcomes. They put children at the heart of decision-making. Political oversight provides high challenge and high support to children's services through effective scrutiny arrangements. Mature corporate parenting ensures that leaders at all levels listen directly to children and learn from them. There is an extensive and generous care leaver offer, including the open-door, all-age offer. This is indicative of the aspiration and value base that corporate parent responsibility does not stop when children and care leavers reach a certain age.
39. Strategic partnerships are robust and well-embedded. As a result, they have withstood challenge, as exemplified in the partnership oversight of children's emotional well-being and mental health. All children and young people awaiting a child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) or from alternative providers are known and monitored. This includes the development of mental health support teams in schools, an increase in staffing to support new ways of working and to reduce waiting times, and the multi-agency approach to children's strengths and difficulties, which has improved timely access to CAMHS. Furthermore, corporate parenting champions have been identified across partner agencies, ensuring that the corporate parenting promise is acted on.
40. The service benefits from impressive, accurate live performance information, which provides the golden thread for governance and accountability through all levels of the organisation. Trends are identified early and lead to assurance activity by the independent scrutiny officers from the children's multi-agency resilience and safeguarding board. This enables a strong focus on performance and has contributed to consistently strong outcomes against a range of comprehensive indicators.
41. The quality assurance framework is far-reaching, ensuring a robust and clear line of sight to practice from the executive and senior leadership team down to frontline practice. Listening to feedback from the inspection, the DCS has taken swift action to ensure that the auditing and moderation feedback is further strengthened to clearly evidence a collaborative process which enriches the understanding of social work practice.
42. Senior leaders and managers are visible and approachable to all, including children and care leavers. Management oversight is regular and reflective and has a positive impact across the service. Social workers told inspectors that they valued supervision as a space to think and test out ideas.
43. Workloads are manageable, enabling workers to practise relationally, spending more time with children and families. Workloads are monitored closely, with

attention given to workers' emotional well-being, with the impact of the work explored through personal supervision.

44. The 'grow your own' approach is contributing to the service's succession planning and a carefully considered approach to retention and recruitment. Although there is movement of workers, there is a longevity in the workforce, with the vast majority of social workers being permanent employees.
45. Social workers say that they are listened to, and are well supported in their preferred continuous professional development pathway. The culture of compassionate leadership and the strength-based approach has fostered a highly motivated, enthusiastic and loyal workforce.

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