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Dear Janice

Monitoring visit to North East Lincolnshire children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to North East Lincolnshire children's services on 16 to 17 May 2023. This was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in October 2021. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Louise Hollick and Margaret Burke.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- Response to contacts and referrals in the 'front door'.
- Strategy discussions and child protection enquiries.
- Emergency action at evenings and weekends.
- Child in need assessments.
- Step up and step down to early help.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

The front door response to children in need of help and protection has improved since the last inspection. This has been an intensive area of improvement focus during this year. While some improvements are evident in this area of the service, leaders acknowledge that there is still much more work to do across the whole of the organisation and they demonstrate appropriate caution in this respect. During this visit, inspectors' findings were in line with the local authority's self-assessment. This

demonstrates that leaders continue to understand the key strengths and the areas for development.

The corporate leadership team is well supported by enhanced sector-led improvement arrangements. These arrangements have created a strong and cohesive partnership which is beginning to build tentative improvement. Strategic improvement plans have gathered pace and momentum after a very slow start in the previous year. Leaders are now more realistically aware of the scale of the challenge needed to progress front door services for children and families.

Since the last inspection, there have been improvements in workforce quality and processes in the integrated front door (IFD) leading to overall better management of demand. The children's assessment and safeguarding service (CASS) has been reconfigured and an effective duty system is now in place. There are now fewer handover points for children's cases. This is reducing the number of changes of social workers for children and is providing a more consistent experience for children and families.

Findings and evaluation of progress

In the IFD, call handlers have been introduced to gather information from referrers at the earliest opportunity to enable managers and social workers to process telephone contacts more promptly and accurately. All contacts are now recorded on the system to build a better picture of the demand and the needs of children and families.

When urgent contacts about children's risks and needs are received and it is clear that they meet the threshold for social care, they are screened quickly and efficiently and sent through to CASS for consideration of next steps and assessments. This enables a swift response and children can be visited the same day if required.

The response to less urgent written contacts is more variable. Some contacts are screened purely on the presenting information even when this is limited. Some assumptions are made about the information without testing these out. A small number of contacts are being closed prematurely on limited information without sufficient professional curiosity or follow-up to ensure that this is the right decision for the child.

Managers in IFD direct initial contacts to early help or social workers appropriately and promptly in line with the presenting concerns. Management direction is not explicitly recorded at this stage, and while most practitioners are aware of the next steps they need to take, some written contacts are not sufficiently screened by social workers. There is brief management oversight at the conclusion of each contact screening. A small number of contacts lack robust management challenge to ensure that there are no gaps in gathering detailed information and ensuring that children are consistently directed to the right level of service.

Not all written contacts from partner agencies contain the right level and quality of information. Social workers are not routinely recontacting professionals to clarify information and to advise them of the quality issues. This means that information is not thoroughly clarified or expanded on, and some agency partners are not developing their understanding of what makes a good contact and what the threshold is.

Police contacts regarding domestic abuse are either shared directly with the IFD or are brought to the daily 'Pitstop' meeting to be discussed with social care and partners. While the 'Pitstop' meeting is a useful information-sharing process, the incidents discussed at the meeting are often several weeks old. This builds delay into responding to children's risks. Leaders have listened to the feedback from inspectors about this process and now have plans to hold discussions with the police to review the functionality of 'Pitstop' and the impact on outcomes for children.

A new process and clear pathway for step up and step downs to early help has made the child's journey between social care and early help smoother and quicker. When families step up to social care, early help workers can now remain involved with the family to provide consistent ongoing support. Step-up arrangements ensure that there is timely action taken by social care in urgent situations, ensuring that children are seen quickly by social workers where required.

Step-down processes are more streamlined and are at the right time in line with children's needs. Efforts are made for joint visits with social workers and early help workers to introduce families to their new practitioner. Plans for early help support at the point of step-down do not always provide a clear focus for intervention, meaning that families may not always be sure of the next stage of support.

When children are transferred to CASS, they receive a prompt response. They are reviewed in the receiving duty team; presenting concerns are considered along with the family history and any complicating factors. This is helpful for social workers in thinking broadly about the concerns and the considerations for the subsequent assessment. It is also a useful team exercise to support learning and sharing case discussions.

Social workers in CASS visit newly allocated children and families promptly, explaining the assessment process and gaining consent. Children are seen as soon as possible. Direct work is completed with children during assessments to gain their wishes and feelings and to better understand their lived experiences. Assessments contain a broad range of information gathered through discussions with family members and agency partners. This helps to build a wider picture of the family's circumstances and family network strengths.

Many children referred into the CASS have had previous involvement with social care that has been ineffective due to the legacy of poor practice. The response to most

recent referrals is now more balanced and robust. Social workers now use appropriate caution in measuring families' ability to sustain changes and have a better focus on the child's lived experiences.

Management oversight in CASS is more frequent than at the last inspection. This is helping to ensure that managers are aware of whether children's needs and risks are escalating. The discussions do not always focus keenly on timeliness of assessments to ensure that children's needs are identified and addressed at the earliest point.

When children's risks escalate, the majority are appropriately stepped up for strategy discussions and child protection enquiries at the right time. The quality of the recording of child protection enquiries is variable, with different formats in use, which does not assist with consistency. However, the outcome of enquiries is usually appropriate and in line with risks. Children are seen by social workers and their views are considered. For a small number of children who are already open to the service, strategy meetings are not always held as promptly, meaning that there is some delay in multi-agency information-sharing and planning.

When emergencies happen over weekends and evenings, children's needs and risks are well considered and placed at the centre of the planning. Consistency of planning and communication with the emergency duty team (EDT) is helped by weekly Friday preparation meetings, which are contributing to more consistent decision-making in the best interests of children. EDT social workers visit children when required, often on more than one occasion over extended bank holiday weekends, to ensure that children are safe and well. Liaison with police and partners is well embedded, with prompt strategy meetings held when required. Handovers to daytime services are well managed to ensure a prompt follow-up for children the following day.

A wide range of quality assurance work is taking place which is helping leaders better understand the quality of practice across the service. Dip sampling and thematic audits are helping leaders to understand and assure themselves of the story behind the performance data. This in turn helps to focus on the key areas that require priority improvement.

Case file audits are of consistently good quality. Audits identify gaps and positive steps to improve on the quality of practice. They focus on the experiences of the child and the impact of practice in improving their outcomes. Better audits include helpful ways that practice could be improved. One-minute briefings from dip samples are a simple and clear way of communicating audit outcomes to staff and to remind them what the basic practice expectations are.

Since the last monitoring visit, the recruited overseas social workers have begun to settle in to working in the organisation. Their recruitment has contributed to higher permanent staffing rates. Leaders are aware that moving to a new country with differences in culture and work practice adds additional challenges and have

identified the need for further work to assist with integration and acceptance in the community to ensure workers' safety and emotional well-being.

Leaders have targeted some resources for agency teams to address the legacy of poor practice and delays in planning for some children. This is enabling the permanent teams in CASS to better manage current demand, with a focus on getting it right for the current cohort of children as they come into the system.

Inspectors heard positive feedback from newly qualified social workers who have been well supported in their induction period. They are learning at the right pace, with a proportionate increase in caseload numbers and complexity in line with their development.

Social workers spoken to by inspectors during this visit were positive about the changes brought about in both the IFD and in CASS. The majority of practitioners feel well supported and consulted. Workers are benefiting from increased auditing, more regular development sessions and regular supervision. They have a clearer understanding of practice expectations and this is assisting in improving the overall quality of practice in the front door and for the initial response to referrals in CASS.

Most social workers in CASS have manageable caseloads, although there are some pressure points evident, in particular with the numbers of children in care proceedings.

Supervision and management oversight are now taking place regularly. For most children, there is management oversight evident on case files at key decision-making points. Consistent high-quality supervision and recording of personal supervision remains an organisational challenge and focus.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Louise Hollick
His Majesty's Inspector