

15 November 2023

Janice Spencer  
Director of Children's Services  
Municipal Office  
North East Lincolnshire Council

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 11 to 12 October 2023. This was the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in October 2021. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Louise Walker and Tracey Ledger.

### **Areas covered by the visit**

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

- The responses to children who are at risk of or are experiencing extra familial harm
- The quality and effectiveness of management oversight and supervision
- Auditing and findings facilitating accurate understanding of practice
- Sufficiency and stability of the workforce

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. This visit was carried out primarily on site. Inspectors conducted interviews with key leaders and met with practitioners and managers. They reviewed children's records, quality assurance documents and local authority data and performance information.

### **Headline findings**

There was an effective multi-agency response to children who were missing or at risk of exploitation at the last judgement inspection. Inspectors at this visit saw some improvements in the quality of assessments of need and risk and a strengthened partnership approach to disruption activity. Children who are vulnerable to extra-familial risk have access to effective support from social workers, specialist workers

and partner agencies. Through jointly developed safety plans, they aim to tackle child exploitation by providing interventions and support for individual children in order to safeguard them and disrupt child exploitation. Senior leaders and managers work closely with a broad range of partners to promote awareness and understanding of extra-familial risks. Workers in the Gaining Respect and Finding Trust (GRAFT) team are curious and knowledgeable. They have continued to keep children in focus when making decisions about their lives, and they work in partnership with children, families and carers to support them and to mitigate and manage risks.

Since the last inspection, workforce stability has improved with an increase in permanent staff, and inspectors found that all children had an allocated worker.

### **Findings and evaluation of progress**

This monitoring visit has focused on exploitation in its widest sense. Inspectors have looked at children's experiences and progress across multiple age ranges and across a number of social work teams. Overall, inspectors found an improvement in the identification and response to risk and need in this practice area. Child-centred responses span the full spectrum of support from prevention and early help through to specialist services, and for those children and young people who are in care or leaving care.

When children go missing from care, and where they are at risk of exploitation, children receive a quick and effective response. This includes the response for those children who currently live out of area. Collaborative, multi-agency approaches and the systems supporting practice are reducing and managing risk for most of these children. Arrangements in place to provide children with a return home interview (RHI) are strong. This is a significant improvement from the judgement inspection findings, in which wider risks were not considered. Information collated from the interviews seen is used to inform future safety planning, and this supports risk reduction. Staff undertaking RHIs are creative, curious and proactive in their efforts to identify when other connected children may be at risk, and swift action is taken to reduce risks for them. There was evidence of challenge when the quality of RHIs was not of the expected standard.

When risks for children increase, well attended, effective child protection strategy or complex strategy meetings take place. As a result, children's risks and vulnerabilities are better understood by all relevant professionals, and their plans are targeted at the right level to help keep them safer. For some children who live out of area, this has resulted in them being moved nearer to home, where appropriate, and this has reduced the risk of them going missing from care and reducing risk of harm.

Children continue to benefit from effective child-centred interventions and strong meaningful direct work from staff in the GRAFT team. This work is underpinned by the relationship-based approach adopted by the team. Staff are skilled and able to adapt how they work with children, including those children with additional needs.

There is a strong emphasis on respecting the voice, experience and expertise of children and young people. This child-centred approach helps social workers to understand better children's lived experiences, including their motivations and perceptions of their situations. This helps children, families and their wider network to develop realistic safety plans and target interventions to reduce risk for children.

Community-based initiatives provide children with access to help and support during the evenings and weekends. This allows staff from a number of agencies to have contact with the children they know and helps them to consider the vulnerabilities of others. Children can raise worries and concerns and be confident they will get the help they need.

The quality of assessments of need and risk has improved since the last judgement inspection but is still not consistent across all teams. Most children's assessments seen during this visit are detailed and capture all aspects of a child's life. Risk assessments are thorough and the scoring matrix used reflects the overall evaluation of risk. Consideration is given to past experiences and the impact of past trauma on their current presenting behaviour and how this increases their vulnerability to exploitation. While management oversight is evident throughout most of the assessments seen, this is not consistent across all social work teams. Senior managers are aware of this shortfall and have active plans in place to improve this area of practice.

The quality of children's care plans is improving, but this is not consistent across all social work teams. Stronger plans reflect the actions and work identified in risk management meetings, giving a holistic view of needs and risks and how these will be addressed. In weaker examples, plans do not always consider all of the presenting risks and vulnerabilities for children. Leaders are aware of the need for improvement and are taking effective action. Inspectors were able to see evidence of live training, support and development plans.

For children reaching adulthood, inspectors saw evidence of effective transition planning and engagement of support from wider adult services where needed. Positively, their current workers will remain actively involved when a child reaches 18 if this is required. This provides reassurance for children that reaching adulthood will not mean their support ceases.

Social workers spoke warmly and proudly about the children they are supporting. They understand the impact for some children and their families of the number of previous social work changes they have experienced. Workers take time to get to know children, and they speak of the importance of building trusting relationships for children, which was evidenced in children's records. Conversations recorded in case records and direct work examples capture the child's words and views of their experiences, and for most children this informs their plan.

Senior leaders have ensured that wider council members have a deeper knowledge and understanding of safeguarding practice than seen in previous monitoring visits. There is increasing evidence of accountability and transparency in performance information as to how well children are safeguarded. Senior leaders have made a significant and positive difference to the way children's social care is perceived across the wider partnership. There is a palpable commitment and enthusiasm from senior leaders across partner agencies to strengthen multi-agency responses to children at risk of exploitation, and there is increasing confidence in social care practice.

Information-sharing across the partnership and joint working is supporting the identification of adult exploiters and gang leaders. Effective use of mapping exercises is leading to the identification of children at risk of exploitation. This is resulting in the successful disruption of some criminal operations and positive trial outcomes.

Improvements have continued to be made in quality assurance activity. Audits seen are thorough and meaningful and provide evidence that auditors know what good practice looks like. The audit tool helps the auditor consider all aspects of the child's needs and risks alongside ensuring that practice standards are adhered to. At times, the actions identified by auditors are process led rather than child focused. Recommended actions are not always used by managers to best effect in order to close the learning loop for practitioners and ensure that remedial actions are followed through.

The local authority offer available to schools to help them reduce the risk of children being excluded is strong and is taken up by many education providers. This is helping some children remain in school who otherwise may be at risk of exclusion. When children are excluded from school, the systems in place to track and monitor these children and support them back into education are effective. A small minority of schools are failing to report children missing from care, which is increasing their vulnerability and risk of exploitation. Senior leaders are aware of these shortfalls and are working closely with strategic partners to strengthen multi-agency practice further with some education providers.

Workers consistently reported to inspectors during the visit how they are well supported by line managers, their team and wider colleagues. Practitioners reported positive experiences of formal and informal supervision that provides them with clear case direction, balanced with support for their well-being and professional development. While this is evidence of improvement and a positive workforce culture change, this was not always reflected in written supervision records. This means it is difficult for managers to track children's progress and the effectiveness of interventions. There are still gaps in the frequency of supervision, and the quality of supervision is inconsistent across teams. Strengthened audit processes and improved performance management arrangements are helping senior leaders to identify these shortfalls and to develop improvement plans and targeted support for staff.

Newly qualified workers reported being very well supported through their first year in employment with intensive induction periods, protected caseloads and shadowing

opportunities. This has made them feel valued, supported and able to confidently begin to work with families with a good knowledge of the legal framework and the local authority's chosen practice model and ethos.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Louise Walker  
His Majesty's Inspector