

21 February 2024

Ann-Marie Matson  
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Dear Ann-Marie

### **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 17 and 18 January 2024. This was the sixth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in October 2021. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Louise Hollick and Sophie Wales.

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

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

- Planning and achieving permanence for children who have been in care for over four months.

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

#### **Headline findings**

Since the last inspection, the response to planning and achieving permanence has improved for some children. Progress has been made in more timely planning for children who have recently entered care, for those children subject to recent care proceedings, and for some children leaving care through safe reunification to parents and kinship care. A legacy of historic poor planning, lack of management direction for social workers, and previous multiple changes of social worker continue to have a negative impact for some children where their permanence plans remain unclear.

Since the last monitoring visit, a new permanent, experienced director of children's services has been appointed, alongside several new permanent and experienced senior leaders. Senior leaders provided inspectors with an updated self-assessment of practice in relation to the scope of this visit. They have set some clear and ambitious targets for priority areas for improvement, building on the improvements already made since the last inspection. Inspectors' findings during this visit are in line

with the self-assessment. This demonstrates that leaders have an accurate understanding of the current strengths and where improvement is needed.

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

The children in care population in North East Lincolnshire remains much higher than national and regional rates, although it is slowly and safely decreasing. Positively, inspectors saw that for children who have come into care more recently, decision-making is more proactive and decisive. This is leading to more timely care proceedings and more children achieving permanence within appropriate timescales. Social workers supporting children and their families in the context of Public Law Outline and care proceedings are undertaking robust and timely assessments of parents and extended family members. Assessments of their suitability to meet children's needs in both the short and longer term are more thorough and realistic.

There has been a recent widespread review of the needs and plans for all children in care. The review has identified some cohorts of children whose existing plans to live with their parents, or to remain in kinship arrangements through special guardianship orders, can be safely advanced. A reunification team has been set up to support these children and their families, and a fast-track process has been agreed with the local family justice board to expedite plans through the court process. Children identified for the reunification team benefit from intensive and sensitive social work to ensure that their needs are fully assessed, and that plans for discharge of a care order or for a special guardianship order are safe and sustainable. Smaller caseloads in this team are enabling social workers to visit families and carers more frequently and complete meaningful direct work with children. This is ensuring that children's views are considered, and that they are well supported to leave care.

A further strength of the reunification team is how well parents and carers are supported to consider and work through any challenges which may have previously prevented their child from returning home permanently or to live in a permanent kinship arrangement. These challenges are addressed prior to the final court application to avoid further delay. There are detailed follow-up support plans to ensure that there is ongoing support for families after the discharge of a care order. Family meetings are held with parents to agree safe contact where the plan is kinship care. This includes contingency planning should family arrangements fail, or need support. This gives children the best chance of success upon their reunification.

There are still too many children in care whose permanence plans are unclear. Many children are subject to protracted care proceedings due to a legacy of previous poor planning, legal delays, a lack of management direction, and multiple changes of social worker. Delays in decision-making for some children have impacted on children's chances of stability and permanence.

For some children subject to historic care proceedings, the delays have been so significant that reassessments of parents have been necessary, with some positive conclusions. A small number of children are no longer being considered for adoption and now have plans to be safely reunited with their birth parents. Drift and delay during care proceedings means that children have to live with uncertainty and insecurity in temporary foster care throughout the process.

The impact for children is acknowledged and understood by the current senior leadership team. All children subject to delayed care proceedings are tracked and now have a plan to bring them to conclusion as soon as it is safe and appropriate to do so. While senior leaders now have an oversight of children subject to ongoing care proceedings, there is not the same rigour and monitoring of children post-proceedings, and children subject to section 20 arrangements. There continues to be a significant number of children who are experiencing lengthy delay as they wait for their permanence plan to be determined.

The high turnover of social workers and managers at all levels has impacted on social workers' ability to develop trusting relationships with children and their families and understand their needs. As stability in the workforce is starting to improve, some children in care are now benefiting from a more consistent social work response. During this visit, inspectors met many social workers with strong commitments to their children, with a good understanding of children's needs, circumstances and plans. Some social workers now have time to build meaningful relationships with children. For children who have experienced significant loss and separation in their lives, this is especially important.

Some children continue to experience multiple changes of social workers, which means they do not benefit from having such strong and stable relationships. A small number of children in care are only visited in line with statutory timescales, which is not always in line with their needs. For example, when children's placements are at risk of breaking down, or when children are allocated a new social worker, there is not always increased visiting to ensure that children are appropriately supported.

Oversight of children's plans by independent reviewing officers (IROs) has improved since the last inspection. Most IROs visit children prior to their review and children are better supported to attend or contribute to their reviews so they can share their views and influence their plans. While this is a positive improvement, IROs are not sufficiently impactful in making sure that decisions following the child's review are put into action where children have been in care for a long time without a permanence plan.

There continues to be a lack of stable, experienced and permanent managers to ensure that social work practice is of consistently good quality. Not all social workers are supervised and supported by managers to make decisions and progress children's plans in a timely way. The senior leadership team are aware of this and

have active plans and strong political support to recruit more permanent managers and social workers as a priority.

The majority of social workers that inspectors spoke to during this visit report positively about working in North East Lincolnshire and said that they feel supported to do their job. They are tentatively optimistic about the future and the vision being created by the new senior leadership team. Leaders are aware of the need to quickly progress the next stages of the improvement plan and have set urgent priorities for recruitment of staff, sufficiency of placements for children in care, and to improve frontline management support and supervision for staff.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Louise Hollick  
**His Majesty's Inspector**