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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 September 2024. This was the seventh monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in October 2021. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Catherine Heron and Louise Walker.

Areas covered by the visit

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

- Child in need and child protection planning.
- The effectiveness of review and core group meetings.
- The quality and effectiveness of managerial oversight and supervision.
- Senior leaders' self-evaluation of this practice area.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. Inspectors spoke with social workers and managers, and reviewed children's records. They also spoke to some parents.

Headline findings

Since the most recent monitoring visit in January 2024, children subject to child in need and child protection planning are better safeguarded and benefit from greater consistency of worker. An effective workforce strategy has resulted in significantly improved workforce stability. A now permanent and experienced senior leadership team has energised and escalated the pace of improvement in this practice area. Its members have created effective quality assurance and performance management systems to help them understand children and families' experiences, and to identify the further training and support staff need to do their jobs well.

Social workers' caseloads are reducing, which is giving them more time to assess children's needs and understand risks more thoroughly and sooner. Resultant plans are better informed, leading to timelier responses and more successful interventions. There is improved evidence of frontline management oversight of children's progress and better oversight social work practice.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Children's social care is benefiting from an experienced and permanent senior leadership team for the first time since the inadequate inspection judgement in 2021. This significant milestone is central to their success in driving positive change and improvement in the experiences of children who need help and protection. The stability of the senior leadership team has improved how the workforce are engaged in the improvement plans, and how they are trained and supported to do better for children.

The stronger focus on improving the identification of risk and need has resulted in better quality and timelier child in need assessments. This is leading to more children and their families receiving the right level of help and support when they need it. Most assessments seen during this visit consider well the child's family history and explore whether the wider family network can safely support children before concerns escalate further.

Improved assessments are resulting in more focused children's plans which contain better information about how children will be helped, who will support them, and the desired outcomes for the child and family. While social workers can verbally articulate very well what the next steps will be if the child's circumstances do not improve, this is not written in the form of a contingency plan. This means the child, the family and the wider professional network do not have a clear plan of what to do if the objectives are not being achieved. Senior leaders have already recognised that the current format of plans is one barrier to improving quality. In response, they have begun a system-wide review of all forms to make them clearer and easier to complete and have planned additional training for all staff.

The voice of the child is beginning to feature more within children's records. Senior leaders have set high expectations around this for staff and managers. Children are now experiencing fewer changes of social worker and are having the opportunity to build a trusting relationship with the same professional. Parents told inspectors during the visit that previously changes of social worker occurred regularly and this affected the progress of their child's plan. Parents said that more recently their children have benefited from a consistent worker, leading to plans progressing at a faster pace.

Children are now being seen more regularly by their social worker proportionate to the child's needs and level of risk. Workers can describe the purpose of visits,

discussion with parents and children and what has been achieved, but written records do not always reflect the detail of this work well enough.

When there are concerns about children's safety, protective responses are timely and effective. There has been significant work undertaken by senior leaders to engage with key safeguarding partners to rebuild trust and confidence in social work and managers' practice in North East Lincolnshire. Key partners are now fully involved in the improvement agenda. The positive results are that strategy meetings, child in need and child protection meetings now involve appropriate professionals. Effective information-sharing is informing the right decision-making to better safeguard children. In all examples seen by inspectors, thresholds for intervention and protective actions were timely and appropriate. There continue to be weaknesses in interim safety planning while child protection investigations are under way. During the visit, senior leaders provided inspectors with reassurances that they plan to review how they currently manage risks to children while child protection investigations are under way.

Fewer children are subject to a child protection plan since the last monitoring visit to this practice area. Senior leaders have completed a large-scale review of child protection plans and children's progress to ascertain how children are being safeguarded, and if the level of support was correct. This work appropriately identified that too many children had become subject to a child protection plan due to previous weaknesses in help at earlier stages, and some children remained subject to plans for too long when their circumstances had changed for the better. Changes in social worker also meant that previously some children's plans drifted. This review also identified that the multi-agency partnership lacked confidence in previous decision-making and support available to families. This contributed to some professionals' reluctance to agree to children's plans being stepped down to child in need or other forms of support.

Professional relationships have significantly improved and there is increasing confidence from partner agencies in both social workers' practice and management decision-making. Child protection core groups are now more regular, which is helping to review children's progress. Children's plans are safely stepping down to lower levels of intervention as appropriate.

Management oversight and supervision of workers' practice is improving but remains inconsistent across the teams. There is evidence both from discussions with staff and from supervision records that more reflective practice discussions are taking place with managers regarding children's assessed needs, risks and the progress of plans. This is also a much stronger focus on staff well-being and their professional development. Newly qualified workers receive additional supervision sessions, and protected time for group work and training. Student social workers are once again being placed by universities in children's social care as their confidence in the learning, development and support that their students receive has increased significantly.

Workforce stability continues to improve. The council and senior leaders have made North East Lincolnshire a more attractive place to work and have successfully recruited significantly more social workers than this time last year. Overall, this has resulted in an increase in the number of permanent staff, rising from 30% to 70% since the last judgement inspection. Newer workers told inspectors that they chose North East Lincolnshire because they are excited by the noticeable changes and want to be part of the improvements for children.

Workers show much enthusiasm and motivation for the new ways of working. Caseloads are reducing towards a more manageable level. This is enabling workers to spend more time supporting individual families and provide a better service to children. Workers say that they have greater confidence and pride in their work, highlighting to inspectors the service restructure and additional layers of management as making a real difference. Workers say that this is providing them with clearer direction and guidance and is enabling them to practise more safely. Social workers described senior leaders as trusted and highly visible.

The now permanent senior leadership team has a strong insight into practice quality and child experience. Its members' self-evaluation is accurate for this practice area. They have injected energy into the workforce and pace into service improvement. A new sector-led improvement partnership (SLIP) arrangement has commenced and is coordinated internally by senior leaders, in collaboration with four other local authorities. These new arrangements are well considered, using resources and the experience of others to drive improved outcomes for children and families.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Catherine Heron
His Majesty's Inspector