

CHILDREN AND LIFELONG LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL

DATE	07/03/2024
REPORT OF	Ann-Marie Matson, Director of Children's Services
SUBJECT	Children's Services Improvement Journey
STATUS	Open

CONTRIBUTION TO OUR AIMS

Improving services for children is one of the core priorities within the Council Plan.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Led by the North East Lincolnshire Council (NELC) Children's Services Senior Leadership Team (SLT), and supported by our Sector Led Improvement Partners (SLIP) as required, progress continues to be made as part of the Children's Services improvement journey.

The outcomes of the most recent Ofsted Monitoring Visit, which was focussed on permanence, have now been published. In summary, Ofsted indicated that since the last inspection, the response to planning and achieving permanence has improved for some children; that their findings are in line with the self-assessment; and that there are clear and ambitious targets for priority areas for improvement.

Work is underway in preparedness for upcoming Ofsted activity, including the next Monitoring Visit and the full Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services, anticipated in the autumn and winter period respectively.

There is an ongoing and amplified commitment to delivering, at pace, the significant change needed to ensure best practice across Children's Services in the context of the identified priorities and ambition of the Council Plan and the continuing improvement journey and plan.

Significantly, work has been progressed to develop a new Improvement Plan for 2024/25. This takes into account progress against the previous plan, feedback from Ofsted Monitoring Visits, and the Children's Services SLT self-assessment.

MATTERS FOR CONSIDERATION

This report seeks to update scrutiny panel members on NELC's Children's Services improvement journey and ensure that scrutiny members are briefed on the performance and implementation of the transformation programme that will deliver the Improvement Plan.

1. BACKGROUND AND ISSUES

- 1.1. NELC Children's Services were judged to be Inadequate by Ofsted in October 2021.

- 1.2. Since October 2022, NELC Children’s Services has benefited from SLIP support from Lincolnshire County Council and the inaugural Improvement Plan was endorsed by the Continuous Improvement Board in March 2023.
- 1.3. A review of the progress made against the inaugural plan has been undertaken and a new Improvement Plan for 2024/25 has now been agreed via the Continuous Improvement Board, which is chaired by the Department for Education (DfE) Children’s Commissioner.
- 1.4. The most recent Ofsted Monitoring Visit was undertaken in January 2024, with a focus on permanence. Although there have been quarterly Ofsted Monitoring Visits to date, we anticipate that the next one will be undertaken in September 2024, and the specific focus of the visit is to be finalised. We anticipate that the next full Inspection of Local Authority Children’s Services will be undertaken very early January 2025.

2. RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

- 2.1. Building on collaborative working to date, a new vision of ‘Our Children Our Future’ was developed and rolled out to system leaders across Children’s Services, and more recently across the wider Children’s Services workforce at a staff engagement and vision event. There are alternative visions referenced across the partnership i.e. in relation to neglect and corporate parenting, and as such, there are opportunities to further rationalise and agree a place based partnership vision across the scope of children’s services.
- 2.2. The new Director of Children’s Services commenced in post in December 2023, along with a Service Director Safeguarding Family Help and Youth Justice, a Service Director Regulated Services, and a Head of Children’s Strategy Vision and Evaluation. Six Deputy Service Directors were also appointed and have now commenced in post.
- 2.3. The newly appointed Children’s Services SLT, along with leaders, managers and staff across the workforce, will continue to work at pace to drive forward significant change. This will provide the platform for development and retention, fostering a cross Council ‘families first’ ‘family feel’ culture, along with our partners, to ensure the best outcomes for children, young people and families, in the context of our local vision and priorities.
- 2.4. Through the refreshed Improvement Plan for 2024/25, we have identified our priority areas of focus, as follows, which will be underpinned by more detailed delivery plans:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vision, Culture and Strategy • Assurance Framework (including governance) • Voice and Engagement • Safeguarding Children Partnership • Partnerships and Boards • Inspection Preparedness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supervision • Integrated Front Door • Meeting need at the earliest point • Family Help and Intervention • Permanence • Care Leavers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review and Restructure • Workforce • Corporate Parenting • Sufficiency • Fostering
---	--	--

2.5. If we are unable to deliver against our local vision and priorities to further progress our improvement journey, this will likely have a detrimental impact on children, young people and families experiences and outcomes; it would also contribute to significant financial and reputational risk to NELC; and may result in ongoing and strengthened DfE intervention.

3. REPUTATION AND COMMUNICATIONS CONSIDERATIONS

3.1. There is a dedicated communications officer linked to Children's Services which is contributing to enhanced, proactive and responsive communications across the workforce and from an external perspective, including in the context of our amplified focus on recruitment marketing activity.

3.2. There does remain a reputational risk of NELC Children's Services not achieving its improvement aspirations, which may impact on the morale, wellbeing and retention of current staff, and discourage potential new starters. However, utilising the capacity identified above, there is an amplified focus on raising awareness of the recruitment opportunities across NELC Children's Services; on promoting NELC as a place to work; and on building relationships with key partners across the place of North East Lincolnshire.

4. FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

4.1. The financial envelope associated with Children's Services is significantly impacting on wider NELC finances. Significant areas of spending which are contributing to the overspend include managing disproportionately high populations and demand, the cost of agency social workers, and the cost of external placements. However, there are early indications that the amplified and renewed approach to our priority areas of focus is having a positive impact on the budget trajectories, in the context of investing to save.

4.2. A continued focus on key improvement priorities will result in improving the quality of practice, reducing demand and meeting need at the lowest level which will contribute to reducing the overall cost to the authority.

4.3. The DfE continue to provide additional support, both direct to NELC and through Lincolnshire County Council as SLIP partners. In addition, there are opportunities to draw down additional DfE funding to contribute to implementing our vision and delivering against our improvement priorities.

5. CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IMPLICATIONS

5.1. Improvement journey: recent areas of focus and key highlights

5.1.1. **Workforce review and restructure:** Following the recruitment of the Children's Services SLT, there has been an amplified focus on creating the conditions to develop a safe, strong, stable and sustainable Children's Services workforce. Progression criteria for social workers has been agreed and social work recruitment has resulted in three successful applicants being appointed to date. There has also been successful recruitment to two key

infrastructure posts, to lead and contribute to a safe, sustainable system across Children's Services and the wider partnership. In addition, significant engagement activity has been undertaken with staff and unions to progress the review and restructure of key leadership and management roles to drive forward the significant change needed to ensure best practice across Children's Services, leading to improved outcomes for our children, young people and families.

5.1.2. Workforce development (including supervision): Work has commenced to scope and develop a new workforce strategy. Key development activity is also being progressed in parallel, key headlines as follows:

5.1.2.1. Amplified relationship building with Hull University and opportunities scheduled in March and April for NELC staff to engage in events to raise awareness of job / career opportunities across the NELC Children's Services workforce

5.1.2.2. Initial conversations held with Frontline to consider their offer, in the context of further developing opportunities to 'grow our own'

5.1.2.3. Discussions have been commenced between Children's Services SLT and Academy NEL colleagues to scope and understand opportunities for apprenticeships, including the possibility of a May cohort in addition to current arrangements; and to consider future arrangements for apprenticeship provision

5.1.2.4. Children's Services SLT, in collaboration with HR support, have facilitated bespoke sessions with international social workers to increase our understanding of the practice and experiences of working in NELC and to reinvigorate our support

5.1.2.5. We are developing relationships with Academy NEL to develop the training and education offer available on the children's services platform; and we have articulated our commitment to ensure a focus on the development of leaders at all levels

5.1.2.6. We are building on the work commenced to scope a workforce dashboard, to further develop workforce governance and profile

5.1.2.7. There is significant focus on rolling out supervision training across the children's social care workforce to reinforce the importance of supervision, to show love, support and regard, and to support timely decision making, and quality intervention and support for children, young people and families. Work has also progress to update the supervision policy and revise the supervision form.

5.1.3. Staff engagement and communications: As a new Children's Services SLT, there has been significant commitment to build on and establish new mechanisms for communications and engagement across the Children's Services workforce, for example:

- 5.1.3.1. The Director of Children's Services (DCS) has continued to roll out a weekly newsletter to share information, reinforce key messages and communications, and acknowledge and celebrate good practice.
- 5.1.3.2. A Children's Services SLT QA session was held in December 2023 at which at which more than 100 staff linked in to hear about the Children's Services SLT initial self-assessment, pending review/restructure and priority areas of focus.
- 5.1.3.3. Children's Services SLT 'drop ins' and 'walking the floor' sessions have been established, with two being held to date. At these sessions, staff have shared their views and experiences of working in NEL Children's Services and they fed back positively about pending changes, that they were happy with the level of support received and that they have been kept informed about what is happening.
- 5.1.3.4. Led by the Children's Services SLT, staff engagement and vision event(s) were held in February 2024, at which more than 200 staff attended, to roll out and embed the vision 'Our Children, Our Future', to articulate our priority areas of focus and to consider 'what good looks like'. Feedback was generally positive, and some staff represented that the Children's Services SLT were passionate, that they helped them to understand their roles and that they valued their direct engagement with staff at the session
- 5.1.3.5. DCS and Service Directors have held bespoke meetings with international social workers to understand their experiences; and Service Director(s) have held two open forums with social workers to date, to consider specific representations, and to build relationships with staff, and further sessions are planned
- 5.1.4. **Partnership engagement:** There has been an amplified focus on building relationships with key partners from a place based perspective and across the regional footprint, to contribute to the identified actions within our Improvement Plan, for example:
 - 5.1.4.1. **Engaging and building relationships with health:** The DCS has met on a 121 basis with the Chair of the CYP Strategic Partnership Board, which was followed up with an invite for them to attend Children's Leadership Team Meeting to talk about how we can engage and contribute to the partnership and future developments. Colleagues from across Children's Services SLT have now been invited to become members of the partnership and the underpinning sub groups, and moving forward, there are some real opportunities to shape and influence the partnership and governance arrangements to ensure a place based strategic approach to children, young people and families in North East Lincolnshire
 - 5.1.4.2. **Public Law Outline:** Children's Services SLT representatives met with our affiliated Judge which was very positive and he represented that he no longer needed to meet with service staff on a regular basis, though Children's Service SLT continue to meet as part of our ongoing relationship building.

- 5.1.4.3. **Engaging and building relationships with schools and settings:** The DCS was invited to engaged in a recent meeting with local Head Teachers to hear about the progress being made for children and young people in the area, and the opportunities available to them, including Horizon Youth Zone, which will be a facility where young people will have the opportunity to discover their passion and purpose in a safe and inspiring venue
- 5.1.4.4. **Children's Services representation via ADCS:** Members of the Children's Services SLT attended an Association of Directors Children's Service's event to consider the strengths and opportunities for collaborative working across the region; and to help to shape and influence the future priorities and governance/reporting arrangements. Invitations have now been extended to representatives from Children's Services SLT to engage in the new arrangements
- 5.1.5. **Boards, partnerships and partnership working (including integrated front door):** There has been a recent focus on developing key boards and partnerships to enhance opportunities for high support and high challenge across the partnership and to drive forward system change leading to best practice and improved outcomes for children, young people and families. Examples of activity and outcomes include:
- 5.1.5.1. **Safeguarding Children Partnership (SCP):** A development session was held in January 2024, at which Safeguarding Partners and the SCP Team reflected on Working Together 2023 and the challenges and opportunities. Key areas for priority action were agreed and progress to date was reported into the recent SCP Assurance Executive. A development plan is in place and work is progressing in relation to priority areas of focus i.e. refreshing governance arrangements, developing independent scrutiny arrangements, reviewing training and education programme and progressing the data development agenda. SCP working group meetings have been established on a weekly basis to ensure ongoing oversight and to ensure progress at pace.
- 5.1.5.2. **Corporate Parenting Board:** A Corporate Parenting Board self-assessment development session was held in February 2024, at which there was significant representation from board members across the Council (including elected members) and the wider partnership to consider strengths and areas for development. A self-assessment document is being written up to reflect the discussion and a development plan will be shared at the upcoming board for endorsement. As part of this, there is a focus on developing the role of corporate parents, access to information, the voice of the child, key areas of focus (i.e. in relation to data development and a new care leaver offer) and strengthening the governance and reporting arrangements.
- 5.1.5.3. **Integrated Front Door:** There is an amplified focus on developing the integrated front door, including re-establishing partnership engagement, and reviewing Partnership Integrated Triage (PIT Stop) and re-establishing the arrangements in the context of an agreed terms of reference. This will be supported by the refresh of the levels of need (threshold) document, which has been commenced and which will be shared across the Children's

Services workforce and the wider partnership.

- 5.1.6. **Assurance Framework:** We have rearticulated our assurance framework so that it contributes to a safe, sustainable system across the scope of children's services at all levels, with a focus on improving outcomes for children, young people and families (underpinned by performance, practice wisdom and voice and engagement). Examples of key assurance mechanisms that have been refined and established include:
 - 5.1.6.1. Children's Leadership Team Meetings have been refined to build in monthly meetings between children's services staff and wider council colleagues, and a newly established challenge and accountability meeting, both of which will be underpinned by routine reporting arrangements to the DCS
 - 5.1.6.2. Monthly Improvement Plan monitoring meetings have been established as a mechanism across Children's Services SLT, and SLIP, to ensure an ongoing focus on driving forward identified improvement plan actions; and regular catch up meetings have been established between Children's Services SLT members and SLIP which can be utilised as a mechanism to share information, collaborate and consider any issues and mitigating actions/next steps
 - 5.1.6.3. A Child Experience and Audit Meeting (CEAM) development session was held with leaders and managers across the scope of children's social care to co-produce a new meeting which has been scheduled on a monthly basis (from March 2024) as means of bringing together the findings from routine and thematic audits, and to have oversight of practice standards. This will be underpinned by an audit programme, and outcomes of the CEAM will be fed into the CLT Challenge and Accountability meeting
 - 5.1.6.4. Led by the DCS, an Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services inspection readiness meeting has been established to ensure an amplified focus on preparing for the upcoming inspection, including the development of an inspection document bank, and full self-assessment
- 5.1.7. **Voice and engagement:** There continues to be a focus on further developing voice and engagement mechanisms at an individual, service and strategic level to ensure children, young people and families views and experiences shape and influence help and intervention. Examples of recent activities and impacts include:
 - 5.1.7.1. **Care experienced young people on the Corporate Parenting Board meetings:** Since September 2023, a care experienced young person has been supported to prepare for and contribute to the board meetings. Following two meetings the young person was asked to chair the board meetings. Since January 2024 a second care experienced young adult has now also joined the board and is being supported and contributing to all meetings
 - 5.1.7.2. **YOUnique awards:** To celebrate children in care, care leavers and the people who make a difference in their lives, Our Voice Listen Up group

members proposed, organised and delivered the YOUnique awards in November 2023, supported by Children's Services staff. It has been agreed that this will be an annual event, and following a reflection session to take account of learning from the 2023 event, planning is underway for the 2024 event, which is being co-produced with young people

- 5.1.7.3. **Direct engagement with Children's Services SLT:** Following the YOUnique awards, Children's Services SLT were invited to attend Christmas dinner with Our Voice Listen Up and they have been invited back to attend on a regular basis. There have also been 121 meetings between the DCS and one Our Voice Listen Up member, and this is an open offer for future meetings. Most recently, the young person was involved in an induction meeting with the Deputy Service Directors. The meetings have all generated some very honest conversations and opportunities to really understand young people's views and experiences and develop relationships
- 5.1.7.4. **Governance and oversight:** Initial discussions held between key leads for voice and engagement across the Council, regarding the development of specific children's services voice and engagement governance arrangements, and opportunities have been identified to strengthen interface with current arrangements, leads and workstreams.

5.2. Children's Social Care performance update

- 5.2.1. There is continued oversight of performance across Children's Services on a day-to-day basis, and routine reporting, oversight and tracking in the context of the Transformation Meeting, Tactical Improvement Board and Continuous Improvement Board. There has been some progress in relation to key measures which demonstrates progress in relation to systems, processes and compliance, though there also remains a focus on improving quality of practice. Key headlines include:
 - 5.2.1.1. Early Help currently has 547 open cases. Open cases have increased since end of December 2023 when there were 477 cases open. Demand has remained at similar levels but we have seen a drop in cases closing.
 - 5.2.1.2. After a large increase in external Team Around the Family (TAF) cases being started in November 2023 (99 TAFs) and December 2023 (93), January 2024 (36) and February 2024 (26) have seen much smaller numbers of TAFs being started. In total 492 external TAFs have been started by partners since March 2023.
 - 5.2.1.3. Demand increased in January 2024 with a 27% increase in the number of contacts received and a 30% increase in referrals received since the previous month. Demand has however dropped in February 2024 to date showing a similar projected rate to that seen in December 2023. Section 47s also increased slightly in January 2024 with 54 Section 47s held compared with 42 in December 2023 and 27 in February 2024 month to date.
 - 5.2.1.4. As a result of increased demand seen in January 2024 and a drop in case closures, the number of cases open to social care services has increased by

4% to 1868 open cases, equivalent to a rate of 565 per 10,000.

- 5.2.1.5. 94% of all assessments were completed within statutory timescales in January 2024 retaining our in-year assessment timeliness rate to 89%, which almost meets the improvement plan target of 90%. Currently 91% of assessments completed in February 2024 were in timescales.
- 5.2.1.6. 79% of Initial Child Protection Conferences (ICPCs) were held in timescales during January 2024. One conference was held a day out of timescales due to a miscalculation of dates. Only 2 ICPCs have been held out of timescales since August 2023. February 2024 month to date has seen 100% timeliness.
- 5.2.1.7. Children in need (CIN) numbers have been decreasing since September 2023 with 819 current CIN. This has increased since 698 at end of December 2023, largely due to increase in referrals and a drop in case closures.
- 5.2.1.8. Currently the number of children on a child protection plan is 266, equivalent to a rate of 81 per 10,000. Child protection numbers have remained at this reduced level since December 2023.
- 5.2.1.9. Currently the number of children looked after (CLA) is 488. Numbers have continued to decrease steadily and safely, and we continue to see much lower numbers of children entering care each month. Only 5 children entered care in January 2024 and none so far in February 2024. 39 children have exited care since the start of 2024.
- 5.2.1.10. The reduction in the children in care population, as well as a focus on enabling children to return to live safely within local provision, has also resulted in 8 fewer children living in externally commissioned children's homes and foster care since January 2024.
- 5.2.1.11. CIN and CLA visits remain consistently in line with target set of 90%. Child protection visits continue to be variable between 80 and 88% compliance.
- 5.2.1.12. The current average caseloads for frontline social workers is 20, which has increased from 19 since December 2023. 3 workers have caseloads of over 30.
- 5.2.1.13. Supervisions have increased since December 2023 but remain below expected levels (CASS 86%, CDS 98%, CiC 78%, New Futures 88%).

6. CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

6.1. No impact

7. MONITORING COMMENTS

7.1. This report does not contain recommended changes to policy or resources (people, finance or physical assets). As a result no monitoring comments have been sought from the Council's Monitoring Officer (Chief Legal Officer), Section 151 Officer (Director of Finance) or Strategic Workforce Lead.

8. WARD IMPLICATIONS

8.1. All wards impacted

9. BACKGROUND PAPERS

9.1. None

10. CONTACT OFFICER(S)

10.1 Ann-Marie Matson, Director of Children's Services

ANN-MARIE MATSON
DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES