

Lincolnshire County Council

Inspection of children's social care services

Inspection dates: 29 April to 3 May 2019

Lead inspector: Rachel Griffiths
Her Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

Services for children and families in Lincolnshire are outstanding, demonstrating the progress that leaders have made since the previous inspection in 2014, when the service was judged good overall. An insightful, highly motivated and extremely child-centred senior leadership team has been relentless in its quest to improve the life experiences of and chances for children in the county. Leaders have responded well to the findings of a focused visit and have implemented a new quality assurance framework which has delivered improvements to services for children.

The model of practice that is thoroughly embedded in children's services is understood, valued and used by a very stable, highly skilled workforce and by partners. This, as well as investment in high-quality early help, and the development of several innovative projects, is making a tangible and positive difference to the lives of children and families in Lincolnshire.

Children in care receive an outstanding service from workers who are ambitious for them and know them well, and, as a result, children thrive. Permanence and

stability are achieved quickly for children who cannot live with their birth parents, and there are high levels of multi-agency support to help them reach their full potential. Excellent direct work undertaken with children in care and children in need of help and protection helps children to fully understand their life experiences and to feel positive about themselves. Children's views are central to assessments and safety planning, and this is helping to improve their circumstances.

Senior leaders know their service and their communities extremely well. This is reflected in a comprehensive self-evaluation and subsequent actions taken to improve and embed practice with some vulnerable adolescents. Although leaders have protocols agreed with district councils for responding to young people who present as homeless, some young people have not had their needs appropriately assessed and leaders cannot be certain that all young people are fully informed about their right to become children in care. The recent work to review responses for children at risk of exploitation needs to be strengthened to improve the consistency of responses to all children.

What needs to improve

- The quality and consistency of support and advice to children and vulnerable adolescents who may go missing, present as homeless or who are at risk of exploitation
- The quality and consistency of pathway plans for care leavers.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection is: Good

1. A creative and responsive early help service is providing children and families in Lincolnshire with effective help and support. The early help offer is well understood by partners. With the guidance and support of early help consultants, partners have become more confident in undertaking early help assessments with families. The guidance has also increased the proportion of early help plans led by partners when a coordinated response is needed to improve children's circumstances. High-quality early help assessments and plans capture children's needs and lead to a range of effective support. A key element to this success is thoughtful direct work by early help practitioners with children and families, using a range of tools. Effective relationship-based approaches are having a positive impact on families, resulting in smaller problems being resolved to prevent concerns or difficulties increasing.
2. The recently established and effective multi-professional Futures4Me service for vulnerable adolescents is reducing risk for vulnerable children, including those who are on the edge of care. The enthusiastic, experienced and suitably trained staff, who have access to clinical psychologists, focus on developing creative and flexible solutions with young people to address their specific difficulties, leading to improved experiences for these children.
3. Children and families receive a prompt and proportionate response to initial contacts made to the integrated front door (early help and children's social care). Social workers and managers ensure that timely and appropriate decisions are made, based on historical information, to ensure that children are helped and protected. The rationale for these decisions is well recorded in accurate detail in children's records.
4. A consultation line within the integrated front door provides valuable support to wider partner agencies. Partners have fed back on how this is developing their understanding of thresholds and what actions they need to take if they have a concern about a child they are involved with. The quality of information provided by partners on contacts is generally good. However, some domestic abuse notifications from the police are difficult to read and do not always clearly convey risks to children. This can make screening more time consuming for already busy staff.
5. The emergency duty team (EDT) provides timely and effective responses to concerns about children in out of office hours, resulting in children being safeguarded. The availability of Futures4Me and early help workers is a valuable addition to the EDT service, as it ensures that children can receive appropriate levels of support when they are in crisis.

6. The designated officer conducts thorough and timely investigations when allegations are received about professionals. This provides children in Lincolnshire with a greater level of protection.
7. When concerns about children's welfare increase, social workers act promptly to assess risk. Children's cases are promptly transferred to the locality family assessment and support teams (FAST). Strategy discussions include the right professionals to share information and agree plans that are proportionate and suitable. In a small minority of cases seen, strategy meetings were slightly delayed as the concerns were received either just before or just as the office was closing.
8. Child protection enquiries are effective and timely in reducing risk to children. Children are seen quickly. When risk is identified, safety planning, based on a thorough analysis of all risks, is implemented. This involves family network meetings from a very early stage, resulting in families developing a better understanding of what needs to happen, and in them being central to the planning to reduce risk.
9. Assessments are timely, comprehensive and of good quality. A new, improved assessment template aids analysis and clarity about children's individual needs. Careful consideration of family history and the strong engagement with children and their family network lead to a thorough understanding of children's specific needs, and the formulation of effective plans to improve their experiences and outcomes.
10. Planning undertaken in partnership with children, their families and partner agencies is effective at improving children's circumstances. Positive interventions, including those provided by early help and Futures4Me practitioners, family networks and community resources contribute to children's progress. Children's progress is closely monitored through the use of scaling tools, at regular, well-attended child protection conferences, core group meetings and children's progress meetings. However, child protection minutes are overly detailed, which makes it difficult for parents and children to pick out the pertinent risks and understand the main concerns.
11. Pre-proceedings are used appropriately in instances where children's circumstances are not improving quickly enough, or risks remain or increase. Pre-proceedings meetings are well managed and social workers clearly explain to parents what they are worried about, and what needs to change in order to safeguard their children. Close management oversight of children in such circumstances ensures that children do not remain living in unacceptable circumstances for longer than necessary.
12. Creative direct work undertaken with children in Lincolnshire is a significant strength. Children's views are actively sought and are instrumental in helping some families make positive changes in their lives. For example, through the

use of words and pictures, children are able to express how they are feeling. When this is shared with their parents, it has helped their parents develop insight into their parenting, prompting positive change. Similarly, direct work with children has helped them to make sense of their own experiences, understand risk and devise safety plans so they know what to do if they become frightened or worried about something happening in their lives.

13. The response and support that disabled children receive in Lincolnshire is very strong. A stable, knowledgeable workforce in the disabled children's team has a real insight into the needs and experiences of disabled children, their families, and their brothers and sisters. The multi-agency teams who work with disabled children ensure that their needs are met and that they have the best opportunity to reach their full potential.
14. Some arrangements for vulnerable groups of young people are well developed and effective, for example responses to risks relating to radicalisation, honour-based violence and female genital mutilation. Arrangements for some other vulnerable groups have recently benefited from review, with initiatives implemented to develop practice. For example, in relation to children who are at risk of child exploitation and those who go missing, new workers, systems and tools have been developed to improve responses and reduce risk. It is too early to see the full impact of this. Although training is planned to help staff use a new child exploitation screening tool, its use is inconsistent, meaning that some children's needs are not fully considered in order to inform assessments and safety plans.
15. Similarly, the quality of return home interviews following missing incidents is inconsistent. While there is some consideration of push/pull factors, the information obtained from discussions with children who go missing is not always used to inform subsequent plans robustly enough. This is a missed opportunity to reduce risk further. For children who are missing education, there is an effective and pragmatic approach, including for those families who home educate their children. Professionals offer guidance, support and challenge to ensure that children are not disadvantaged or placed at additional risk by being educated at home.
16. Leaders have worked with district councils to help them understand the needs of vulnerable 16- and 17-year-old young people who present as homeless, and protocols are helping to improve the consistency of responses. However, not all young people receive a full assessment of their needs, and they are not consistently well advised of their rights and entitlements. Consequently, young people are not always able to make fully informed choices about their lives.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers is: Outstanding

17. Children in care receive an outstanding service. Children only come into care when it is necessary and appropriate for them to do so. The ethos of the local authority is that children should remain at home wherever possible. Social workers support families to make positive changes and this includes the extensive use of parent and child foster placements, giving families the best opportunity to remain together.
18. When admissions to care are necessary, most are planned, following high-quality assessments that identify children's vulnerabilities and needs. Of particular strength is the direct work undertaken with children during the assessment process, which helps to accelerate care planning and decision-making for children when they cannot remain with their parents. The direct work provides an in-depth understanding of what life is like for children and a comprehensive understanding of what they need to thrive. This leads to careful placement matching and extensive interventions being provided, which help children progress.
19. When it is not possible for children to remain living with their parents, alternative permanence options are considered from a very early stage, resulting in children achieving stability and security as soon as possible. The systematic early use of family network meetings helps to identify all potential options within a child's family and friend network to establish whether children can live with significant people in their lives. Assessments of these potential carers are thorough. Consequently, children in care in Lincolnshire are almost twice as likely to be living with people important to them than the national average. For these children, remaining in their wider birth families is helping to enhance their sense of identity and belonging.
20. For those children unable to return to their birth families or live within family networks, alternative permanence options are carefully considered, with parallel planning occurring from the earliest opportunity. Excellent social work evidence to court supports effective care planning and decision-making for children. The frequent use of fostering to adopt placements minimises unnecessary moves for children and provides them with security sooner. Children are able to live with their brothers and sisters, and when they can't, assessments strongly consider their individual needs to ensure that they are living in the right placement for them while still maintaining their relationships.
21. Adoption is considered in a timely way, and children are matched and placed with adoptive parents at the earliest opportunity. The preparation and assessment of applicants results in adopters who report that they fully understand the challenges of being an adoptive parent and are equipped with the strategies to meet these successfully. Comprehensive information-sharing,

support and training are instrumental in supporting positive adoptive placements to last.

22. When children come into care, social workers can draw on a wide range of available foster homes that are able to provide a high standard of care for children. The fostering service's marketing and recruitment strategy has been highly successful. Nearly all children living in foster care are placed in local, well-matched placements that meet their needs. This enables children to maintain contact with those important to them and it provides continuity for education placements and other services that may be supporting their needs.
23. Foster carers are very well trained and supported. This enables them to provide care of a high quality. Foster carers are committed to the children in their care and advocate strongly on their behalf. Foster carers are particularly positive about the recent Caring2Learn initiative, which is helping them better support the education needs of children in their care. Foster carers report feeling listened to and consulted and say that that they are treated as professionals. They feel valued. As a result of the high levels of training and support, Lincolnshire successfully retains foster carers, and this in turn results in most children experiencing high levels of placement stability and security. Children have a safe and secure home from where they can develop.
24. The very small minority of children who live outside of Lincolnshire do so because this best meets their needs. For example, careful attention is paid to the cultural needs of unaccompanied young people, who are offered homes close to facilities and better links to their own communities. This helps them to settle. Consequently, they have positive experiences and they make very good progress.
25. Children in care build strong, consistent and extremely positive relationships with their social workers and carers. Social workers show dedication and have high aspirations for children. Achievements, no matter how small, are celebrated on a daily basis as well as at an annual awards ceremony. It is evident that social workers care deeply about children in care and exceed the expectations of their role in order to help them thrive.
26. Children's views strongly influence decision-making and planning about their futures. Advocacy support is accessible and available. Great efforts are made by staff to ensure that children understand the decisions made about their lives and very careful attention is paid to their wishes and feelings. The use of words and pictures is extensive. Not only does this provide children with an opportunity to express themselves, it also helps them to make sense of their experiences. This, complemented by sensitively written minutes to children following care reviews, means that children have a better understanding about how decisions were made about their lives. Comprehensive and colourful life-story books provide children with everything they need to know

about their history. This is exceptional practice which significantly enhances a child's sense of identity.

27. Children and care leavers are well supported to stay safe. Risks to children are quickly identified. Plans implemented rigorously help to reduce risks. Danger statements and safety goals help children, their families and their carers to understand and manage risks well.
28. Children in care and care leavers benefit from timely support with their emotional and mental health. A care leaver reported what a positive difference this has made to their life, and that they now look forward to a happy, successful and fulfilling future. Although the timeliness of initial health assessments could be improved, children who have been in care for longer have all their health needs very well met.
29. Local authority officers, the virtual headteacher and his team have a united aspirational vision for the education of every child in care. Personal education plans reflect and support children's aspirations. Case studies show that officers of the virtual school show determination and tenacity in seeking out opportunities to make these aspirations a reality. The joined-up approach of different local authority departments and service leads to corporate parenting, which champions the social, emotional and educational needs of children in care, and offers children improved outcomes through and beyond school. From ages 14 to 18, the transition of children in care to post-care preparation is prioritised. The local offer for care leavers is supplemented with practical support through initiatives such as apprenticeships or opportunities to attend education at specialist post-16 provisions.
30. As children approach adulthood, they are supported to remain with their foster carers beyond 18 years, and some young people benefit from this well into their 20s. Additionally, recent initiatives to develop supported accommodation offer some young people opportunities to stay close to their children's home so that they can continue to receive help and support from adults they know and trust.
31. Care leavers report that their workers in the care leavers service are providing them with helpful and effective support in all aspects of their lives. Workers are persistent in maintaining contact with care leavers and know them well. Care leavers' pathway plans do not always reflect care leavers' aspirations, or the level of support provided to them from their care leaving workers. Stronger plans were seen in the social work service.
32. Children in care and care leavers are helped to understand their rights and entitlements. Lincolnshire's children in care council, Voices4Choices (V4C) meet regularly, and in addition, children and care leavers attend three annual full-day 'big conversations' with leaders and members to express their views. Additionally, young people from a young inspectors' service, supported by two

apprentices, talk to children about their experiences in order to represent their perspectives and inform service development.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: Outstanding

33. Leaders prioritise the needs of Lincolnshire children and act as excellent corporate parents who have the highest aspirations for their children in care. This is exemplified in the concerted work to deliver stable permanent homes for children and the prioritisation of family and friends' networks to ensure that children remain within their support networks wherever possible.
34. A clear commitment to doing the best for children is impressively modelled by the senior leadership team. Successfully focusing on all children's experiences has improved children's journeys overall and has contributed to outstanding practice for children in care. The vision of 'putting children first' is shared throughout the workforce and shines through at all levels of the organisation. Staff are supported to do their best for children, and the environment in which they work allows them to flourish and excel. The celebration of children's achievements, the constant drive to seek feedback from children and families and learning from complaints are testimony to the dedication of leaders to positively impact on children's lives.
35. The senior leadership team has an excellent understanding of its service, as evidenced in its comprehensive self-evaluation which accurately reflects the local authority's strengths and areas that it seeks to further develop.
36. Partnerships are extremely strong. Strategic partners engage well with service re-design to improve children's experiences and outcomes, with a relentless ambition to achieve excellence for children. The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service and the judiciary are extremely complimentary about the quality of work produced by social workers and about the constructive and mutually challenging relationships that deliver improvement in practice.
37. Child-focused planning and delivery of services that aim to build on families' strengths underpin the model of social work practice used in Lincolnshire. This model has been enthusiastically embraced by staff and partner agencies, resulting in it being consistently visible and adhered to. An integrated model of delivery with early help, children's health and children's social care results in effective multi-agency partnerships coordinating and delivering services for families that they value, and that make a positive difference to children's lives. Across the breadth of children's social care, children's unique and diverse needs are respected and well considered. Practitioners help children to understand and feel proud of their individuality.

38. Effective scrutiny and engagement of elected members in understanding services for children has successfully maintained and increased investment in early help and safeguarding services that appropriately deliver responsive support to build on families' strengths. This includes the recent development of Futures4Me, which offers intensive support to children who are experiencing factors that make them more vulnerable. This strategy has been effective in managing demand for services and has kept the proportion of children in care manageably low.
39. The senior leadership team is ambitious and forward-thinking. Members of the team promote best practice and fully explore all learning opportunities. The involvement in the Department for Education Partners in Practice programme has given senior leaders opportunities to model new ways of working and has brought additional funding to support Lincolnshire families. Managers regularly bring back learning from other local authorities to deliver evidence-based practice which they then adapt to fit in with their own model of practice.
40. The commitment by leaders to continuous improvement is exemplified by a new quality assurance framework and board, which have been developed since Ofsted's last focused visit. This gives leaders a clear view of frontline services and helps them to appropriately focus on improvement activity. Recent work to review and refresh responses to children who go missing or who are vulnerable to exploitation shows how leaders respond when they identify areas for improvement. Learning from audits and quality assurance processes is shared with staff. Through monthly bulletins, developing excellent practice days and showcasing good practice sessions, leaders share exceptional practice in order to promote practitioners' individual learning and development.
41. A comprehensive range of participation activities with children and staff to develop and produce new services further reflects the ambition of leaders to get things right and continually improve services for children. For example, staff and children have had a lot of input in the development of the new assessment template. Children's views have also been central to the review of the very successful Futures4Me and Caring2Learn initiatives.
42. Investment in the children's workforce has been instrumental in delivering increasingly stable and experienced teams of practitioners. Caseloads are manageable across all teams. Staff benefit from an extensive range of training which has developed their competence, skills and confidence in communicating with children and families. Inspectors have been extremely impressed by the exceptional direct work undertaken with children that conveys their experiences so well.
43. A relentless focus on improving the quality of frontline management oversight and staff supervision has been successful, resulting in staff feeling very well

supported in their roles. Regular and high-quality reflective supervision, which uses a scaling tool to measure the progress being made by children and families, is helping to track children's experiences and ensure that the right steps are taken so that children's circumstances improve.

44. Staff are unanimously positive about and committed to working for Lincolnshire. Staff turnover is low. The senior leadership team recognises the importance of being visible and accessible, and, as a result of the highly supportive, yet highly challenging, environment created, the workforce feels valued and proud to work in Lincolnshire. A decision to invest in high-quality digital technology has made a real difference to the staff's working lives and it enables them to easily capture the direct work they complete with children. The inclusion of children's drawings and high-quality direct work in their electronic records brings to life children's views and experiences and helps convey their journeys and progress. This is outstanding practice.



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