

# Inspection of Lincolnshire local authority children's services

**Inspection dates:** 24 to 28 April 2023

**Lead inspector:** Margaret Burke, His Majesty's Inspector

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

Lincolnshire continues to provide outstanding services for vulnerable children and their families. Children and families have benefited from leaders prioritising and investing in services, strengthening the range and offer of support. Leaders have enhanced services in areas identified for improvement at the last inspection in 2019 and further developed support to children who need help and protection. Children and families have access to effective locally based early support services. Outstanding social work practice ensures that risks to children are well managed within their families and communities. Children also benefit from strong partnership working, allowing them to access additional support from universal services.

Children in care are well cared for and make excellent progress. Most care-experienced young people receive good support to help them to be successful as they move on to independence. This support is provided by committed relationship-focused workers. There is more to do to improve the service offer to care leavers, particularly older care leavers, to ensure that they can access the outstanding level of support that children in other service areas receive.

## What needs to improve?

- The quality and consistency of planning and case records for care leavers.
- The offer to care-experienced young people aged 21 and over.

## The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: outstanding

1. Children and families in need of help and support have access to appropriate and timely responses from a comprehensive range of support services. The early help system, together with consultants and practitioners, provides helpful advice and support to professionals, alongside direct support to children and families. Strong multi-agency partnership enables children and families' needs to be recognised early and effective support provided to them by people in their communities, including their schools, who most often know them best and are already positively involved in their lives.
2. Children benefit from comprehensive early help assessments completed by a range of multi-agency professionals. These assessments consider the important things for the child and include their family's history and wider needs. Early help practitioners work hard to build good relationships with children, whose voices are heard and recorded in their plans and interventions.
3. When children's needs increase, effective arrangements enable step up to social care for social work intervention. Early help practitioners remain involved, providing continuity of relationships for children and their families for as long as necessary.
4. Requests for services or for professional advice sent through the integrated 'front door' are processed effectively and responded to quickly, the vast majority within 24 hours. Referrers are routinely informed of the outcome of their contact. If the outcome is to take no further action, outcome letters explain the reasons why and provide advice and guidance about alternative support services for families.
5. Parental consent is considered by practitioners and most partners seek consent before requesting help and support for children. However, when a request for help and support is below the threshold for a social care assessment, and parental consent has not been obtained, this is not consistently followed up or sought by officers when screening the contact. A small number of contacts are therefore received and subsequently closed without ensuring that parents and children are directed to appropriate sources of support or being aware that information about them has been sent to the integrated front door.
6. When children are at risk of significant harm or require a social work assessment and support, they are promptly transferred to the family

assessment and support team (FAST). Parental consent is appropriately obtained or managed for these children within the FAST service.

7. Children in need of help outside office hours receive a prompt response. This is supported by good information-sharing between the emergency duty team and day services. Partnership working is effective, with joint visits and strategy meetings taking place where this is necessary. Out-of-hours work is supplemented by early help and Futures4me workers, who also provide responsive out-of-hours support to children and families.
8. The vast majority of decisions to transfer children to FAST for an assessment are appropriate and timely. Once children are allocated to a social worker, they are visited in a timely way by social workers and other support practitioners who quickly build sensitive and trusting relationships. This is reflected in case records and through the direct work tools routinely completed with children, firmly maintaining their voice at the centre of the work with them and their family.
9. Strategy meetings are held promptly, the majority attended by professionals who are able to share information about risks to the child and inform decision-making. Strategy meeting minutes are appropriately detailed, but actions lack timescales to help provide clarity about when actions need to be taken. Despite this, visits to children take place quickly. Child protection investigations are timely and thorough, and include the views of parents and children where appropriate. Analysis of risks and needs is detailed and results in sound recommendations regarding the next steps. Positively, referrals for services are not delayed because of the investigation, ensuring that families receive timely support.
10. Social workers understand the pre-birth protocol and complete timely assessments to identify current and future risks to unborn babies. The quality of pre-birth and child and family assessments is consistently strong. History is fully explored. Family networks and partner agencies' views are included, as are children's views, to inform the analysis of risk and planning moving forward. Family network meetings are considered and convened early on in the assessment process to explore family and friends' assistance to support safety and planning.
11. When children are subject to a child in need or child protection plan, review meetings are held regularly and are well attended by partners who know the child. There is a shared understanding by professionals and families of the authority's strength-based model of practice. Scaling is used well at each meeting to help professionals and families to monitor the progress of plans, to understand whether interventions are making a difference for children or whether escalation is appropriate. The quality of written child protection plans is mostly good, with clear and relevant actions to help improve children's lives. Child in need plans are more variable in quality. Not all have clear timescales

for actions to be carried out so that all members of the team around the family know exactly who is doing what and by when.

12. The vast majority of children enter pre-proceedings when it is appropriate to do so. Public Law Outline processes are strong and effective in supporting high numbers of families to exit this process safely and successfully. Where progress is not made, there is timely access into proceedings. However, across the service, for a small number of children experiencing neglect the response was less timely. The vast majority of these children are now receiving the right intervention, and current social workers have a grip on what needs to change.
13. The majority of children who live in private fostering arrangements experience a quick and appropriate response to assess their circumstances and ensure that their needs are met.
14. Interventions by the children with disabilities team to support disabled children are highly effective. Social workers demonstrate excellent practice, having significant knowledge and understanding of children's needs. Assessments are comprehensive, and they also suitably consider the needs of parents and brothers and sisters. Transition planning appropriately starts when children reach the age of 16, with allocation to adult services at 17.
15. The vast majority of children who are reported as missing from home receive a timely and effective service. Return home interviews are completed with the child by the professional considered best placed to do this. For some children not known to social care, this is done by the child's school and offers the child the opportunity to share their experiences with someone they know and trust.
16. There is a strong coordinated partnership approach to children who are at risk of child criminal exploitation, which is effective in identifying and responding to children's changing needs and risks. When children aged 16 or 17 present to the local authority as homeless, they are appropriately assessed to ensure that they secure suitable support and accommodation. Children are made aware of their rights and entitlements. These areas have seen significant improvement for vulnerable children since the last judgement inspection.
17. When concerns are raised about professionals who work with children, these are taken seriously. The vast majority of responses are swift, evidence-based and considered at the right threshold.
18. The local authority has streamlined the system for reporting children who are missing from education. They follow up any concerns raised quickly and check on the child's whereabouts to make sure that they are safe. Strategies to address the increase in the number of children who are not in receipt of full-time education are having a positive impact. Frequent reviews of the education provision for children on part-time programmes help these children return to full-time education. Some children, including unaccompanied asylum-seeking

children, engage with home tuition for a short period while an alternative placement is identified.

19. There is clear guidance in place for when children become electively home educated. Checks are completed with parents to ensure that their 'intention to educate' is being realised and that children are appropriately safeguarded. If the education provided by parents to their children is not suitable, the local authority helps parents secure an appropriate educational provision.

## **The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding**

20. Children in care receive an outstanding service that results in their life experiences significantly improving. The local authority is committed to supporting children to remain with their families if it is safe to do so. A range of edge of care services, including Futures4Me, support children and families to make positive changes in their lives, resulting in some children being able to remain with their parents happily and safely.
21. When children come into care, this is because it is in their best interests to do so. Most admissions to care are planned. The family court and Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) report positively on the preparation and quality of evidence produced at the start of care proceedings.
22. Leaders, managers and staff understand the importance of children achieving permanence without delay. Permanence is considered early. For some children, this is before they enter care. Once in care, leaders closely track children's plans for permanence. Permanence plans progress at a suitable pace, in line with children's needs. Delays are either purposeful or unavoidable. Social workers consider all permanence options for children and, through concurrent planning, identify the best option for them.
23. When children come into care, social workers are committed to supporting children to live with family or friends. Family network meetings help identify family and friend options early. As a result of this, and after thorough assessments of family or friend carers, a high number of children achieve permanence through connected carer placements and/or special guardianship orders (SGOs). This outstanding work has enabled many children to successfully remain within their family and friends network.
24. If children are unable to remain within their family network, and SGO or adoption is not a viable option, social workers make strenuous efforts to secure permanent foster placements for children, within Lincolnshire when possible. The matching of children with the right carers is very carefully thought out. Regular matching events for foster carers have enabled some children to be successfully matched with permanent foster carers. Beautifully presented profiles, in which children's strengths and needs shine through, are shared with foster carers at these events. Prospective carers are provided with information

about the skills they will need and the support that will be provided to help the child to thrive.

25. Many children achieve stability and security via long-term fostering. Children's views inform local authority decisions about permanence in this form. Ratifying such permanent placements via a panel helps give children the certainty they need and deserve. One child, who celebrated the panel decision with his carer and social worker, told his social worker that this had been the best day of his life.
26. Social workers support children with adoption plans extremely well. As a result of well-matched placements and careful transitioning, children successfully settle with their new adoptive family. One adopter spoken to said that she had an amazing experience from start to finish. She felt well informed and prepared from the outset. She is absolutely thrilled that she and her son are now contributing to the training of new adopters.
27. Some women have testified about benefiting from intensive 'life-changing' support from the Time team, helping them to break the cycle of repeat removals of children from their care. This work has also positively supported birth mothers to engage with the adoption process and to meet adopters, and enabled adopters to represent them positively to their child.
28. Plans for children in care to return home to their birth parents are considered and actioned when assessments suggest this is safe and the best option for them. As a result of effective work by edge of care services, a number of children have successfully and safely returned home to their families.
29. When children are placed with their parents under placement with parent regulations, this plan and legal status are regularly reviewed to assess whether they remain appropriate. Social workers carry out updated parenting assessments to establish whether children's needs are being adequately met. If they are, and this has been maintained for a suitable period, then applications to discharge care orders are appropriately progressed. As a result, children are not remaining in care longer than is necessary, and they can continue their lives without unnecessary statutory intervention.
30. Social workers know their children very well and talk about them with pride, love and affection. Stable relationships with consistent social workers provide children with someone that they know and trust to share their worries and aspirations with. Social workers visit children at a frequency determined by children's needs.
31. Social workers spend time with children to ensure that their views and wishes help to inform their care plans. Social workers understand the risks to children when there are concerns for their emotional well-being and the impact that being in care has on their identity and self-esteem. Children's identity and culture are promoted and well considered in their care plans.

32. Inspectors saw some beautiful life-story work and words and pictures work undertaken with children who are adopted or living in long-term foster care. This high-quality work enhances children's sense of identity and understanding of their journey into care.
33. Before every review, social workers update the child's assessment using the 'valuing care' tool. This assessment, undertaken jointly with and written to children, enables an analysis of children's changing needs. Assessments are of a high quality and feed into meetings to review children's progress and planning for children's day-to-day and longer-term needs. Written plans are clear, with clarity about who is doing what and by when to help ensure that children's needs continue to be met to a high standard.
34. Meetings to review children's progress are timely and involve relevant people, including children if they wish to attend. Independent reviewing officers routinely visit children between and before reviews to ascertain their views. Sensitively written review minutes, written directly to children, celebrate progress and help children understand the outcome of their review and the help and support they will receive moving forward.
35. Family time is promoted and considered a priority for children. Children spend time with brothers and sisters and extended family members, to help maintain their family networks. Some family time is supervised, and workers have oversight of how well this is working. Social workers listen to children when they would like arrangements to be different.
36. Social workers and leaving care workers support unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and care-experienced young people to do well. They live in homes and accommodation with support that meets their needs, in culturally diverse communities. They are fully supported legally to secure their status.
37. Children's physical and emotional health needs are well considered and addressed by social workers, carers and health professionals. Carers for children complete strengths and difficulties questionnaires to help identify children's emotional health and well-being needs, and this meaningfully feeds into children's valuing care tool assessments and care plans. Children in care have prompt access to child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) and this support does not immediately end when children become adults.
38. Children in care receive good educational support. The virtual school team is committed to achieving the best outcomes for children in care. The team collaborates very effectively with schools and professionals in other services to ensure that these children attend school regularly and are successful. The Care2Learn programme is helping schools understand and support children in care. Children in care benefit from a range of enrichment activities to broaden their experiences, including music lessons, sports clubs and residential trips

abroad. For the majority of children, their personal education plans (PEPs) help them track their progress and celebrate their achievements. In a small number of PEPs, the targets lack clarity and are unhelpful.

39. Most children live in high-quality foster placements within Lincolnshire, where they are happy and settled and participating in a range of enjoyable activities to help develop their skills, confidence and self-esteem. Foster carers receive excellent support, which promotes the stability and consistency of care for children.
40. Sufficiency challenges do exist, particularly for children with the most complex needs. In response, the authority has ambitious plans which are well under way to address this gap in suitable placements. In the interim, a very small number of children under 16 have been placed in unregistered placements over the last six months. The welfare of these children is closely monitored while they are living in these unregistered children's homes. In response to learning from these placements, leaders have further strengthened and formalised review arrangements pending moves to more suitable placements. The authority currently has no children living in unregistered children's homes.
41. Lincolnshire's children in care council, Voices4Choices, continues to influence service development through conversations with elected members, through their role as young inspectors, by being part of staff interview panels and through participation in 'Big Conversations'. Children's achievements are celebrated through the annual Fantastic Amazing Brilliant (FAB) events, in recognition of the excellent progress they make.

### **The experiences and progress of care leavers: good**

42. Most care-experienced young people in Lincolnshire are well supported by their leaving care workers, who make positive efforts to build trusting relationships with them. For some young people, this has translated into daily contact at times when they have needed extra support. Contact with young people takes place through many different channels, including home visits or more social activities, for example going for a coffee or a meal out with their leaving care worker. One young person said to an inspector, 'Everyone I have encountered is loving and easy to talk to.'
43. For a small number of young people in custody, contact is not as responsive in meeting their needs. Workers say that access to young people in prison is difficult due to staffing issues in the prisons. Records of efforts to arrange visits and keep in touch with these young people did not match with the higher number of attempts described by workers. If those young people later review their records, they will not see the numbers of unsuccessful attempts made to keep in touch with them.
44. Young people are invited to a range of participation events, which provide them with opportunities to be involved in positive activities and share their



views, wishes and lived experiences. Popular activities include sports get-togethers for care-experienced unaccompanied asylum seekers. There are photos in the 'family album' of some events but leaving care workers acknowledge that the take-up of some group events is low.

45. Care-experienced young people are encouraged by their leaving care workers to maintain relationships with people who are important to them. Life Links services are on offer to help young people reconnect with people they have lost contact with, and a small number have also benefited from relationship guidance and strategies provided by the leaving care services' mental health worker.
46. Young people's routine health needs are revisited regularly through the pathway planning cycle. While not all care-experienced young people have been made aware of how to obtain their health histories, the vast majority are registered with GP services. Some young people have struggled to access dental care, either due to the lack of availability of NHS dentists or due to them not having the resources to pay for the treatment needed. Leaders say that this can be paid for by the local authority, but this offer is not widely known by frontline workers.
47. There is a full range of specialist advice and support services in Lincolnshire to assist young people with their emotional and mental health needs. The needs of most young people are supported effectively. Services include advice and support to care-experienced young people to help them to address challenges with substance misuse. CAMHS input continues beyond young people's 18th birthday. Counselling support is also available through children's centres, 'Steps2Change' and through a specialist worker in the Barnardo's team. Two young people spoke in glowing terms about the support they received from the specialist mental health worker. They described her work with them, done at their pace, as making an 'amazing' difference to their lives, which has enabled them to engage in employment, maintain accommodation and develop friendships.
48. The care leavers' offer is available on the council's website. While some of the offer still varies between districts, leaders are progressing incrementally in ensuring a consistent offer for all care-experienced young people across Lincolnshire. The offer explains to young people how to access their rights and entitlements at the time they need it. This includes support with accessing identity documents, for example their driving licence and National Insurance number, and setting up home grants and support with education, employment and training. Young people who spoke to inspectors provided examples of what they are personally receiving as part of the care leavers' core offer, although they did not use this term to describe it.
49. The pathway planning process has been reviewed and changed, in consultation with young people. Young people are invited to complete these documents together with their leaving care workers. Assessments and plans are written in

the young person's voice, and this helps capture their words and views. While young people do not necessarily value the document itself, they told inspectors that they appreciate the opportunity to meet with the leaving care worker to discuss what is going well and if they need support. Young people who choose not to be involved in completing the form are given a choice to comment on it once completed. Pathway plans are updated regularly but not always when young people's circumstances change. The quality of recording is variable. Some plans reflected positive feedback to young people on their progress, with workers recording that they are 'impressed and proud' of young people. Some records provide detail on the presentation of young people, what they have said, their worries and what is working well. However, not all plans contained aspirations for young people's futures. Many plans lacked specificity about how young people were going to achieve their goals, the support on offer or timescales.

50. Care leavers say they value the support they get to help them plan appropriate next steps for work or education. Young people in higher education say they are supported well by the virtual school to be successful following this educational route. Those who choose alternative paths are also supported by the service with what they need to achieve, for example payment for a Construction Skills Certification Scheme card to secure training for employment or help to buy equipment. There are opportunities across the authority for apprenticeships, which young people value. The proportion of care leavers in education, employment or training is steadily increasing. One care leaver reported positively, saying that the staff who support him 'are amazing and have changed my life'.
51. Some young people over the age of 21 are in receipt of support. However, many who reach the age of 21 and are not in education, employment or training are informed that they will be closed or 'stepped down', and contact with the service can be made by ringing the urgent care line. Inspectors were told that this decision took place in discussion with young people and was considered in the light of their presenting needs. However, this is not clearly reflected in their case records. It was not evident that all young people are given a choice about the level of involvement they would like to sustain or what is suitable. Too often, keeping in touch takes the form of just an annual letter. This is insufficient encouragement to young people to get back in touch with the service if they need further support.
52. Workers demonstrate a sound awareness of the risk of potential and actual exploitation for young people, and specialist advisers work with vulnerable young people. All young people have a risk assessment carried out and most include all vulnerabilities and known risks. Safety plans are realistic and written with the young person. However, it was not clear how widely these assessments are shared with other professionals in the young person's life. Leaving care workers say these are very helpful when they are covering duty, to inform their responses when helping a young person they do not know.

53. Transition planning from being a child in care to a care leaver is too variable. Some leaving care workers develop relationships with young people from the point of allocation. Other leaving care workers, even when allocated early, do not begin to build relationships with the young person until just before their 18th birthday, by attending their last review. This does not provide enough time for the development of secure relationships at a potentially challenging time for young people.
54. A wide range of placement options have been commissioned and most young people live in housing that meets their needs. All the young people spoken with were content with their accommodation. The supported placement offer, in conjunction with housing and private providers, is positive overall and most young people are making good progress in developing their independence skills. However, bed and breakfast accommodation is also used, offered as an emergency response to a small number of young people. Some young people stay put with foster carers or their special guardians and are well supported with this choice.

### **The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: outstanding**

55. Elected members and senior leaders across the council work successfully together to support the needs of children and their families. The lead member is a strong advocate for children's services and has provided continuity in the role since 2005. The chief executive officer also brings a wealth of experience to the service, having previously been director of children's services in Lincolnshire. There is confidence across the council in the leadership of children's services. The council's senior leadership team integrated approach ensures a shared clear vision across the local authority and a strong focus on delivering high-quality children's services.
56. Leaders demonstrate that they have an accurate assessment of the strengths and key challenges for children's services. Elected members have unlocked significant financial resources to ensure that Lincolnshire continues to provide outstanding services for children and their families. This is most evident in the ongoing commitment to the development of early help services. Lincolnshire has maintained a high number of its locally based children's centres (48), which are effective in providing accessible multi-agency services for children and their families. Lincolnshire has embraced new initiatives and adopted different service responses to support children in their families, including the Futures4Me services, which work alongside other professionals providing innovative ways of working with adolescents and their families. These services have contributed to the positive reduction in the number of adolescents entering and leaving care in Lincolnshire.
57. Leaders have successfully responded to the challenges many authorities have faced resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, including finding suitable homes

for children in care. They have responded to these pressures by contributing to placement sufficiency financially and strategically, with cross-council support. The council has supported the development of three children's homes in Lincolnshire. They have further successfully invested in their fostering services and have a competitive offer to carers, both financially and in terms of carer support. A targeted recruitment strategy has led to an increase in permanent social workers. Additional funding has been made available to support the children's services workforce, increasing the numbers of apprentices, introducing market supplements and providing team assistants, who provide dedicated business support for social workers. This is helping the authority to stabilise its workforce and to manage workloads more consistently.

58. Lincolnshire continues to play an influential national role in sector-led improvements, providing extensive and effective support, advice and guidance to other local authorities, working alongside the Department for Education. Lincolnshire is also a participant in the development of the new Family Hub Programme.
59. Partnership working is one of Lincolnshire's strengths, which has stimulated creative and innovative practices to support the work with vulnerable children and their families. Strong partnerships at the strategic senior level are mirrored by strong and effective operational multi-agency working. Workers at every level demonstrate constructive working and problem-solving approaches which support children to thrive. Universal services are well supported by early help workers, who go the extra mile in supporting families. The support provided to schools is particularly impressive, enabling them to positively embrace the council's relationship working model and provide effective early support to children and their families.
60. Leaders are well supported by a strong corporate performance team, whose members have provided them with a comprehensive array of sophisticated performance reports and information to help them maintain their focus on continuous service development. Quality assurance processes are firmly embedded, running through the service and continuously developing. Numerous approaches are used to determine quality and improve and strengthen practice and learning, to enable leaders to better understand and improve services' responses to the community they serve.
61. The council is a dynamic host of the Regional Adoption Agency (Family Adoption Links). Although relatively new, this partnership is thriving. Key elements of innovative leadership, shared values and collaborative working have created a modern adoption service which is valued by existing adoptive families and appealing to potential adopters.
62. There is a wide-ranging strategic approach to participation, with a clear strategy in place and the use of different methods to gather feedback. These range from formal groups such as V4C (Voices for Children in Care), the focused work of young inspectors, and regular meetings between elected

members and young people (Big Conversations) to the use of online platforms and surveys. This approach ensures that children and young people's views are heard and understood by the authority at every level and that children and young people are actively involved in the development of services in Lincolnshire.

63. Leaders have successfully focused on the areas for development since the last inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) inspection in 2019. This has led to strengthening of practice with vulnerable adolescents at risk of exploitation and going missing and the response to homeless 16- and 17-year-olds. They recognise there is more work still to do with their care leaver services to bring them to the same consistently high standard as other service areas.
64. The local authority has an effective learning and development programme that addresses learning needs at all levels of the organisation. This, and the focus on growing their own workers and managers, provides opportunities for workers to be developed and make progress in their careers.
65. Leaders at all levels of children's services are viewed by staff as being both visible and approachable, despite the size of the local authority. Changes that are taking place are positively communicated to all staff. Workloads are carefully monitored by managers at all levels of the organisation. Flexible working allows staff to better balance work with other commitments. The local authority is both sensitive and supportive to workers experiencing their own personal difficulties. This has led to leaders creating an environment in which workers are well supported to develop positive working relationships with children and their families and achieve positive outcomes with them.

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