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Dear Ms Sandy

Focused visit to Lincolnshire County Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Lincolnshire County Council children's services on 16 and 17 March 2022. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Neil Penswick and Lisa Walsh.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need and children subject to a protection plan.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. This visit was carried out partly by remote means. One inspector primarily used video calls for discussions with local authority staff, managers and leaders. One inspector was on site.

Headline findings

Children are supported highly effectively to make good progress. Strong relationship-based social work practice underpins all of the local authority services. This approach ensures families receive the right help at the right time, with a clear focus on the needs of children evidenced throughout planning and interventions. This ensures a strong focus on progressing the life chances and the reduction of risk for children. Social workers know their children well and speak with great warmth about them. Experienced and committed senior managers have continued to provide inspirational leadership for children's services. The children's services also benefit from stable and experienced political corporate leadership. Services for children have remained a high priority throughout the pandemic and resources have been protected and enhanced since the last Ofsted inspection in 2019.

Main findings

Effective professional relationships between early help and children's social care enable the smooth transfer of work between services, with most families benefiting from continued support from staff they know through co-working. There is a clear

focus on the needs of the children, which ensures that services are delivered at the right level. When circumstances change so does the support. Partnership working is strong and well established, including good links with health services, schools and the police.

Effective partnership working contributes to the reduction of risk for children. Partner agencies and families are consistently involved in children in need and child protection core group meetings. Plans show detailed, comprehensive discussions with parents about concerns. Progress and what needs to happen next are clearly evidenced in the meeting record. The emphasis on identifying support across family networks means that improvements in children's lives are built upon family strengths and resources. Plans result in services and support to families that make a positive difference and improve children's outcomes. Actions are mostly specific to individual children's needs, with clear timescales. This supports effective monitoring and review. When children in need plans have not been effective in bringing about positive change, risks have been considered and, when necessary, cases have been escalated to child protection.

Children are seen regularly by social workers who know them well. When appropriate, children are seen alone. Visits are purposeful and social workers have meaningful discussions with children to understand their wishes and feelings. For younger children or children with additional needs, social workers use observation well to understand relationships between parents and younger children. Creative direct work supports children to build trusting relationships with their social workers. Social workers are creative in the approach to engaging families when English is not their first language. This supports progress of plans and the reduction of risk for children.

Assessments are detailed, with clear evaluation of strengths and risks leading to appropriate recommendations for next steps. Assessments include effective information-gathering from partners, which is used to help analysis. The impact of family history and how that impacts upon current circumstances is understood. In most of the cases reviewed, assessments had been updated to re-evaluate current needs and risks. The views of children and adults are threaded throughout the assessment. Assessments are holistic and address the needs and risks to children well. Social workers work proactively to put safety plans in place to reduce and manage risk. It is positive that these are developed closely with parents and, where appropriate, children to ensure that risks are understood. Expectations are clear within safety plans and this supports the reduction of risk for children. Timely action was evident in all the children's case records sampled by inspectors.

Disabled children and their families are supported by experienced social workers who have the expertise to understand their needs and build trusting relationships. Children's needs are well assessed, using a range of information alongside family histories to enable good analysis and recommendations.

Support for children is appropriately stepped down when risks decrease. Children move down from child protection plans to child in need plans when their lives have improved, and move up when risks increase. When children's lives improve and they come off child protection plans, they continue to receive statutory support through child in need plans before a decision is taken to close involvement or pass them to early help services. Children are supported at the right tier of intervention.

Child protection conference chairs are an experienced group of practitioners who provide managers and leaders with a good oversight of the quality of social work practice. Conferences are, in the main, taking place face to face, with some elements online. Although the majority of challenge happens informally, when children's plans are not progressed sufficiently promptly, child protection chairs escalate concerns effectively to practice supervisors and, when necessary, senior managers, in the best interests of children. Child protection chairs have good oversight of the quality and impact of core group meetings. The use of midpoint reviews provides a good opportunity for the chair to review the progress of plans and offer advice or support if appropriate. The local authority's investment in multi-agency training in their preferred model of social work practice effectively supports a joined-up approach to decision-making at child protection meetings.

Over the past year, approximately 25% of the children who have entered pre-proceedings have been stepped down due to successful engagement by parents in the comprehensive and creative support offered by children's social care. There is a very strong practice toolkit which ably supports the progress in this work. The local authority is aware that the Public Law Outline tracker is not as effective a tool in providing an overview for senior managers of those children on the edge of care and is further strengthening its overview.

Edge of care services provide tailored support for children and their families. This multidisciplinary team includes youth offending, clinical psychology, speech and language therapy, child and mental health services and education mentors. The focus of the practice builds upon a strengths-based approach, restoring family relationships for children working towards a positive future. Work is reviewed regularly to ensure this is appropriate and moving towards change.

When situations become urgent, leading to children not being safe in their homes, the local authority takes appropriate and prompt steps to provide them with alternative accommodation, including considering the support that can be offered by the extended family.

Social workers who met inspectors spoke strongly about the authority's strengths-based model and how supporting family networks underpinned their approach. They spoke about how this positively changed the power relationship with families. They described their teams as 'highly supportive'. They reported that the county is strong on professional development of social workers, with this being discussed in monthly personal supervisions. There is a good range of training on offer from the council and the safeguarding partnership. They also attend mandatory training and 'new normal' (post-COVID-19) training.

Supervision is held regularly. Sessions are detailed and have a focus on what is happening for children. Supervision follows the local authority's preferred model of social work practice and supports social workers to reflect on their work, offering challenge where appropriate. Contingency planning is often evident in supervision records. Workers report that their caseloads are manageable with good regular support from their practice supervisors. Newly qualified social workers talked about having protected caseloads and being very well supported in the county.

The support to staff during the pandemic was described as very good by all the staff who met inspectors. The local authority appropriately focused on ensuring that face-to-face visits took place for those children who were identified as at risk or who would benefit from direct social work contact.

Senior managers have continued to provide strong leadership to Lincolnshire children's services since the last Ofsted inspection. The results of this positive work are evident in the shared language and approaches across all partner agencies, the consistency in the quality of social work service across the large rural county and that improvements to services continue to be made during the pandemic.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning the next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Neil Penswick
Her Majesty's Inspector