

CABINET

DATE	8th July 2020
REPORT OF	Councillor Ian Lindley Portfolio Holder for Children, Education and Young People.
RESPONSIBLE OFFICER	Joanne Hewson, Deputy Chief Executive / Director of Children's Services
SUBJECT	Children's Social Care Improvement
STATUS	Open
FORWARD PLAN REF NO.	Not included on the Forward Plan – to be considered under the General Exception rules as set out in the Council's Constitution

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A report summarising the Council's response to the Ofsted Monitoring Visit in 2019, and progress on the identified actions within the Department for Education (DfE) Improvement Notice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Cabinet:

1. Endorses the decisions and actions taken to date as part of the Improvement Plan.
2. Notes the areas of improvement against the 'DfE Escalation Measures' and that Cabinet endorses the proposed way forward, instructing the Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Children's Services to so implement in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Children's Education and Young People.
3. That this report is referred to the Children and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Panel.

1. BACKGROUND AND ISSUES

- 1.1 The Council's Children's Social Care provision received two monitoring visits in 2019 as part of the Ofsted Inspection Process. The first visit in March 2019, where three priority actions were identified and then a further monitoring visit in October 2019. During this visit Ofsted identified five further priority actions that needed completing. They also felt insufficient progress had been made against two of the three identified in March. In conclusion, they reported that insufficient progress had been made overall, which in turn resulted in the DfE issuing a formal Improvement Notice to the Council on 18th December 2019. The Notice was accompanied by seven escalation measures in areas which needed significant improvement within a six-month period. This report outlines the progress made towards the measures and identified next steps.

1.2 Improvement Notice

The Council currently holds an Ofsted rating of 'Good' for its Children's Social Care arrangements. Part of the ongoing inspection process includes monitoring visits to local authorities between formal inspections (usually every three years). North East Lincolnshire Council received a monitoring visit in March 2019. Ofsted found there to be three areas which needed addressing and required the Council to formulate an action plan to make improvements in these areas. A further monitoring visit took place in October 2019. Ofsted found, during this visit, that insufficient progress against the areas of concern in the action plan had been made. They identified a further five Priority actions that needed to be addressed. They raised concerns regarding the overall quality of children's social Care and outlined these concerns fully to the Council in December 2019. The nature of the concerns then resulted in a formal Improvement Notice being issued by the DfE. The Notice outlines the concerns and the improvements that needed to be made. The Notice was accompanied by a number of 'Escalation Measures' (see below) which the Council would be measured against. The formation of an Improvement Board chaired independently by a nominated DfE representative was required, along with an Improvement Plan outlining how the Council intended to meet the improvements within the given timescales.

1.3 The Council's response

1.3.1 The response has focused on four priority areas:

- Levels of risk are identified for children and managed effectively
- Improved decision making and management oversight
- Improved accuracy in performance data and reporting
- Improve the input and quality of information within the system

The Improvement plan focused on the four areas outlined above, which included actions to address Ofsted's concerns and the seven priority actions and also the escalation measures identified by the DfE. Since December 2019 the Council has made significant progress in meeting the escalation measure targets and securing the improvements needed in this area. Improvements have continued to be made despite the challenges of the current COVID -19 pandemic.

Measure 1 :

The authority needs to produce a robust plan that will outline how it will safely reduce excessively high caseloads. We will need assurance and evidence that the average number of cases for each social worker is reducing each month. The average number needs to be at a maximum of 30 for all social workers by the end of December 2019, and 25 by the end of March 2020

As well as a focus on average caseloads, focus needs to be given to social workers with caseloads in excess of 40, with their caseloads being urgently reduced.

Council Progress – Target Met

The average number of cases held by a social worker is now 17, compared to the high numbers in December 2019. The average number of cases held by an ASYE (Assessed and Supported Year in Employment) is 14, which is within the target of 18. The Council has now fully addressed this area.

Measure 2:

Due to the significant number of cases where Ofsted found children to be at risk, the local authority should urgently undertake a review of cases.

Council Progress – Target Met

All cases within the system have been risk assessed and actions taken. We continue to monitor all cases through a new tool that has been developed. This has been particularly important during the current pandemic when many children are not in school and are not visible on a daily basis.

Measure 3:

The local authority should take adequate steps to strengthen its approach to performance data, thus improving accuracy and reliability of data produced, with reduced reliance on manual counting. There should be clear evidence both within casefiles and arising from audit that accurate data is used by line managers and senior leaders to ensure compliance and drive quality of practice.

Council Progress – Target Met

Significant work has been undertaken to strengthen our approach and the Council now has reliable data. This information is now being used by managers to performance manage the service.

Measure 4:

We will expect audit of cases will show the quality of all social work practice and social care assessments and plans are on an improving trajectory.

Council Response – Target Met

Audits are now showing an improving trajectory of practice quality across all different aspect of the audits. This will be an ongoing area for improvement.

Measure 5:

There is a swift and significant increase in the percentage of Initial Child Protection Conferences (ICPCs) taking place within 15 days of Section 47 enquiries. This needs addressing rapidly so that North East Lincolnshire is within 10% of the regional average by the end of the year.

Council Response – Target Met

A number of procedural changes have been made to the strategy discussion process which has resulted in significant improvements by reducing delay.

The procedural changes have been successful, and the target is now being exceeded (86% of ICPCs were within 15 days of a Section 47 strategy meeting decision against a target of 68%).

Measure 6:

Data shows a month-by-month increase in the percentage of all statutory social care visits (particularly child in need and child protection cases) which are carried out within the required timescales. The percentage of both Child in Need (CIN) and Child Protection (CP) cases visited within required timescales will be at least 75% by the end of March 2020, and at least 85% by the end of June 2020. There must be evidence that all visits are purposeful and that children are seen and spoken to, alone if possible.

Council Response -Target Met

Visits undertaken in time have improved and are now exceeding the target. Visits are currently at 90% for CP and 77% for CIN. The data does not take into account virtual visits, and so is in fact under-estimating the improvement.

Measure 7:

The local authority should ensure that social worker supervision is regular for all staff and that all cases are reviewed at supervision sessions in each cycle.

Councils Response -Target Met

There is now a supervision timetable and all staff are now receiving regular supervision. Due to COVID-19 some supervisions this month have been delayed due to staff not being available.

The Independent Chair of the Improvement Board is required to submit a report to the DfE outlining his views with regards to the next steps. In his view, "The escalation measures detailed in this local authority's Improvement Notice have been satisfactorily addressed. There are no longer large numbers of children at potential levels of unknown risk. A period of rapid improvement has enabled a more measured approach to routine improvement work within children's services to recommence. The Service is coping well with the current restrictions

on working practices due to Covid-19.

The local authority is now able to shift the focus of its improvement work onto a broader improvement plan, this will be more suited to driving the quality of practice issues in order that an increasing proportion of the work will be considered to have met the “good” standard.

The local authority’s auditing system is effective (recognised by OFSTED in their Focused Visit) and should quickly pick up any deterioration or improvements across the domains of quality of social care practice.

During the Covid-19 arrangements sickness levels have remained low and the intake and assessment service is operating safely”.

The Council has now received formal notification from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families that they are satisfied that sufficient progress has been made and that the Council can now focus on embedding quality of practice across Children’s Social Care.

1.4 Next Steps

The local authority will refresh its plan as part of its continuous improvement journey to consider all the OFSTED framework domains.

1.5 FINANCIAL IMPACT

As laid out in the main body of the report. The potential financial implications of not achieving the escalation measures are that the DfE could have issued a ‘Direction’ notice resulting in significant costs to the Council.

2. RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The purpose of the escalation measures was to give the DFE the power to “escalate” the ‘Improvement’ notice to a ‘Direction’ notice if these concerns were not addressed. Therefore, the question of a Direction notice no longer arises. However, it should be noted that the service will now move to a general improvement journey to continue to raise the quality of the service.

3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Following the Ofsted outcome, it was recognised that significant financial resource would need to be made available in order to deliver the necessary improvements. Consequently, an earmarked reserve was created to support both transformational change and increase capacity in key operational areas. The value of this reserve in 2020-21 is £2.7m. Whilst a significant sum, the scale of the challenge will result in many potential calls on this reserve which the service are carefully controlling and monitoring.

4. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 There are no legal implications that immediately arise from the recommendations sought.

5. HUMAN RESOURCES IMPLICATIONS

There are no direct human resources implications arising from this report.

6. BACKGROUND PAPERS

Improvement Notice (Dec 2019) - DfE
Monitoring Visit Letter (Dec 2019) – Ofsted

7. CONTACT OFFICER(S)

Joanne Hewson, Deputy Chief Executive/Director of Children's Services,
01472 325141

Councillor Ian Lindley
Portfolio Holder for Children, Education and Young People