

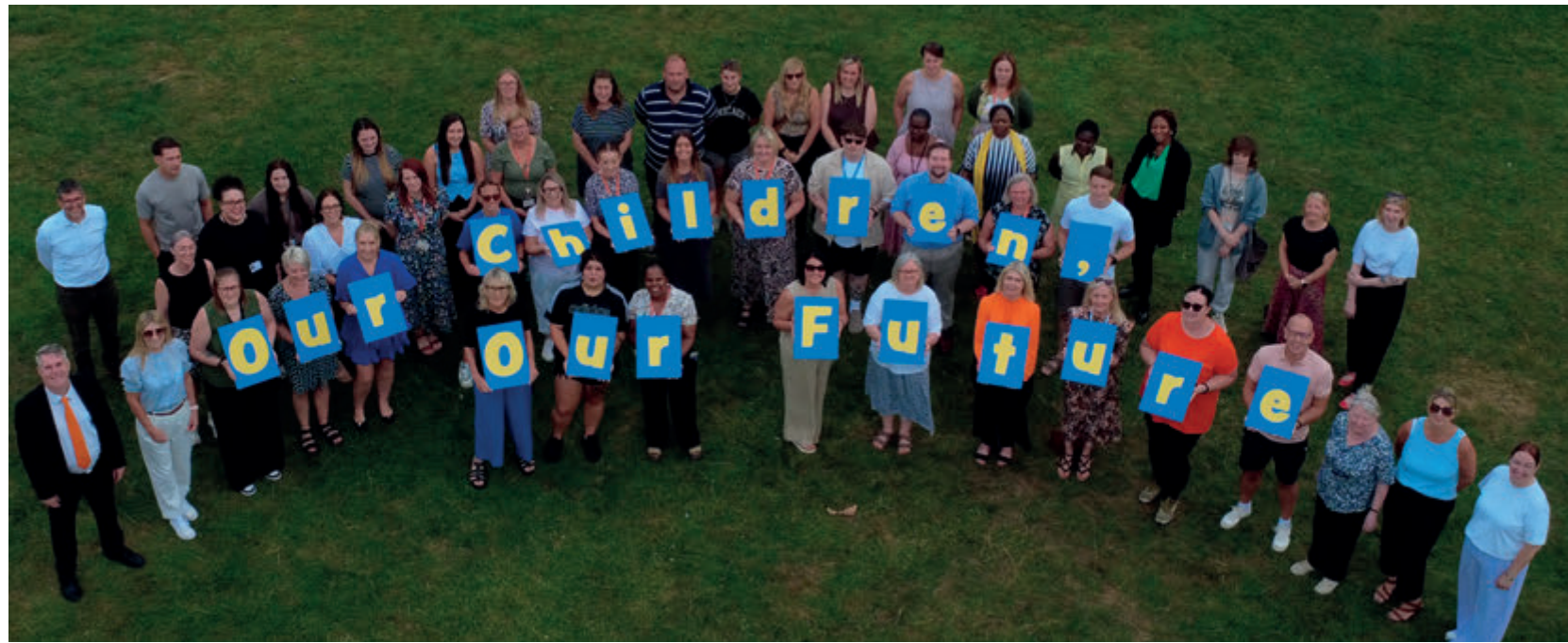



**NORTH EAST LINCOLNSHIRE COUNCIL**

# A HOME-GROWN SUCCESS STORY

HOW NORTH EAST LINCOLNSHIRE TURNED AROUND IT'S CHILDREN'S SERVICES IN RECORD TIME





# On the fast-track to success

Children's services in North East Lincolnshire have bounced back from a damning Ofsted report in less than four years. A comprehensive overhaul has delivered remarkable transformation and sparked a borough-wide effort to build a better future for children and young people

It's being talked about as one of the fastest turnarounds in children's services ever seen.

To get a handle on just how dramatic the change has been at North East Lincolnshire Council you need only compare Ofsted's reports from November 2021 and July of this year.

Children's services have gone from being 'inadequate' across the board with 'widespread weaknesses' to 'good' thanks to rapid improvement and 'whole-service transformation' attributed to 'outstanding' leadership.

Inspectors concluded: 'Children's services are largely unrecognisable from what they were in 2021.'

Previously, partners had lost faith in the council. There is now a highly effective multi-agency integrated front door to ensure the right decisions are made for children and strong partnerships focused on early intervention and prevention are the norm.

What was a workforce in crisis with an overreliance on agency social workers has been transformed with permanent teams giving children the continuity and stability they need. They are now supported through a redefined practice model that's relational, strength based and solution focused.



But perhaps what really sets North East Lincolnshire apart is the way the improvement of children's services has become a catalyst for the entire borough. Whereas before it was an area hampered by its profile – off the beaten track and with longstanding deprivation – now it is harnessing its community spirit and many other strengths to change the narrative. Building a better future for children and young

people is everyone's business, from Grimsby Town FC to a wide range of local employers.



## Shaped by children's experiences

What makes the council's journey even more remarkable is much of the transformation has been achieved in less than two years. While improvements began almost four years ago, Ofsted says the pace of change accelerated rapidly with the appointment of a highly successful and experienced children's services senior leadership team in December 2023.

For director of children's services, Ann-Marie Matson, who had led 'outstanding' neighbouring authority North Lincolnshire, it was something of a calling to 'come home' to the place where she started her career working with children and families over 30 years ago.

'It was a broken system that just wasn't working for children,' she explains. 'There was system-wide failure – not just children services alone, the whole council and community needed to be open to change and challenge. It had to be a collective effort bound by love and care for children in our borough.'

She admits there were 'dark days' throughout the improvement journey. What kept Ann-Marie and her team on track and continues to be the driving force for change is the feedback from children and young people.

'The first thing I did was to spend time with children and young people to enable me to understand their experiences. Their willingness to share their lives with me to help me get this right for them and what I heard will stay with me for the whole of my career. It's been those

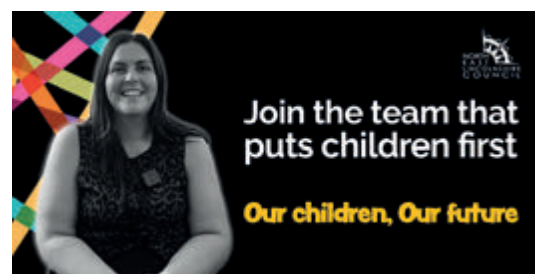
reminders that have kept me going as a DCS on this improvement journey.

'Young people have been involved throughout, through the Our Voice Listen Up group, and we take everything to them for feedback. I have talked about co-production for years but I've learned more about real co-production in the last 20 months – really opening yourself up to children's experiences of care services and holding yourself to account.

'We've made sure their voices are at the heart of our change work and have used their experiences to create that pace of change. People can't argue against what a child has experienced or needs.'

When Ann-Marie arrived, she found a revolving door of agency social workers and a 'pretty horrific' profile of children's services. Individual social workers and many other frontline staff were 'trying their best but they never stood a chance.'

A multi-faceted approach to recruitment and retention



has turned the situation around.

'It's about turning it on its head. The story previously was nobody would want to come and work here. Now we proactively celebrate practice and achievement and empower our workforce to be part of the solution. It's about looking at every aspect – training, engagement events, CPD, good quality support and what we've coined "permission to be proud". We've also been able to draw on invaluable support from our sector-led improvement partners from Camden, North Tyneside and Leeds who have helped improve practice and upskill our staff.'

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## Collaborative effort

Another key success factor has been the 'reset and rebuilding' of relationships with partners, particularly through the children's safeguarding partnership and via the co-located, integrated front door.

'The feedback was there'd been a complete lack of communication and understanding around the role of children's services and role of the wider partnership in supporting children and young people,' says Ann-Marie. 'There was a willingness among partners but no one had joined it up and created the environment for practice to flourish. We relaunched the whole strategic landscape and rebuilt partnerships.'

Huge effort has gone into re-engaging the borough's schools – not just within the context of early intervention but helping them to play a wider role, for example by supporting the drive to recruit more foster carers [see overleaf].

It's just one element of a revamped sufficiency strategy that's helping to grow a more diverse range of carers to meet children's needs within the borough rather than see them sent far and wide.

The scale and speed of improvements wouldn't have been possible without, in Ofsted's words, 'tenacious' commitment from the council's corporate and political leadership. It's not only the way they have backed a fresh approach in areas like corporate parenting [see overleaf], says Ann-Marie, but also the engagement throughout the organisation – in particular, utilising the creativity of the communications and marketing teams and dedicated workforce leads.

'Through their help, I think we have successfully created a different story for children's services in North East Lincolnshire.'

The focus is now on building on the success to date and ensuring progress is sustained on what portfolio holder for children and education, Cllr Margaret Cracknell, describes as a 'remarkable journey', adding, 'we now move forward together with pride, and with determination – and also with humility that there is still much to do for our children, young people and families.'

North East Lincolnshire 'has deep-seated challenges in terms of deprivation and need', says Ann-Marie, who believes 'you can take that as a deficit or as a platform to be ambitious and improve, which is what we have done.'

'An Ofsted rating isn't the end, it's a point in time. We are really proud of our staff but this is just a pitstop and it's about a continuous learning and transformation journey. We're building something that's going to be sustainable because we have to start with our children if we are going to break generational cycles of deprivation and need.'

# A 'grow your own' approach to building workforce stability



Having a stable workforce is critical to children's services up and down the country and competition for staff is fierce.

For North East Lincolnshire that task was even harder while it was rated 'inadequate' and under Government intervention. And yet in the space of less than two years, the number of agency workers has fallen from 74 to 14 while 66 new permanent social workers and 38 managers have been recruited.

It comes down to a creative and innovative approach to recruitment that seeks to change perceptions, make it easier for local people to pursue a career in social work and empower staff to become part of the solution.

Children's services has a dedicated communications officer and workforce capacity on hand to help connect staff internally and keep them informed while also giving the council an edge in the recruitment market. It's about promoting the borough as a great place to work in partnership with a wide range of local organisations while utilising the department's biggest asset – its staff.

'All our recruitment videos are made in-house with

real-life social workers and real practice examples,' Ann-Marie Matson explains. 'Because of our geography and the challenges we face, we needed to rewrite the story in terms of perceptions of what it's like to practice here.'

'It's about helping the staff to tell their stories about their work through social media and other avenues.'

This shift, along with greater investment in training and development and clearer career pathways, has helped to transform morale, as evidenced by a 31-point rise in the number of children's services staff who would recommend the council as a great place to work.

Its 'grow our own' approach is part of a revamped workforce strategy that has also seen children's services engage universities in the area to boost opportunities and awareness of the profession, including supporting Grimsby Institute of Further and Higher Education in its bid to set up degree apprenticeship and BA social work courses. The council is also supporting a new three-year social work apprenticeship programme.

The end result of this greater stability, combined with consistent high-quality practice, is more children are receiving the right support at the right time.

# Councillor Philip Jackson, leader of the council

The meeting I went into almost four years ago to discover our children's services were 'inadequate' was probably the worst I've ever encountered. Contrast that with the one I went to a few weeks ago – one of the best.

We have come such a long way in a short space of time.

Back in 2021, Ofsted gave us a wake-up call. We had no self-awareness, we didn't have a clear picture of what was happening in children's services, relationships with key partners had broken down and too many children were being referred to us.

We now have strong partnerships with



everyone from the police and health to schools, a highly effective integrated front door and robust oversight through our children's scrutiny panel and corporate parenting board. As Ofsted put it: 'Senior leaders know their service extremely well.'

You can see how much things have changed in the conversations we're now having with schools to tackle absenteeism and boost outcomes and the way we work with police around earlier intervention. But there's still more to do because we want to make them even better and become 'outstanding'.

However, this journey has achieved

even more than turning around children's services. It's galvanised the council, our partners and the wider community to put children and young people front and centre of everything we do. That's why we now have local businesses signing up to support our fostering campaign and greater collaboration across employers within the public and private sectors to work together to promote North East Lincolnshire as a place to live and work.

Only through collective efforts like this can we ensure improvement is sustained and we deliver on our vision to build stronger communities and a stronger economy.



## Growing the family business

All parents want to give their children the best start in life. That's why the council has thrown its doors open via a new scheme that's giving care leavers the chance to gain invaluable work experience and skills

A dozen young people recently took part in a six-week programme of work experience within the council to test out a new approach that's designed to support care leavers into training, education and employment.

The insight drawn from the pilot scheme has helped to shape Family Enterprise, which from the autumn will give 16-25-year-olds who are either in care or care leavers the chance to develop skills in a wide range of settings.

Those taking part in the trial were matched by the leaving care team to work experience opportunities across the council in everything from tourism to regeneration with additional support around key skills such as communication and workplace etiquette.

As a result, a third of participants have been offered apprenticeships, one young person is hoping to return after completing university to join the council's graduate scheme and another has secured a place via a local training provider.

But that only tells half the story. Feedback from young people highlights the impact that a structured and supportive programme like this can have – boosting confidence and self-esteem while making them better prepared for the world of work.

Family Enterprise will build on the pilot scheme's success and is just one aspect of a comprehensive corporate parenting strategy that has been co-produced with people who have experienced care leaver services.

It's another example of how the voices of young people are playing a pivotal role in reshaping and improving vital services to help the council deliver on its goal to break down the many barriers faced by care leavers.

This approach to corporate parenting has become an area of strength, as highlighted by Ofsted's latest report on children's services: 'The new chief executive and political leaders bring a renewed determination to embed corporate parenting principles and do all they can to support children and care leavers to live meaningful and fulfilling lives.'

'The inclusion of children and care leavers at the corporate parenting board is now a key strength. This brings rigour and challenge, and leaders respond appropriately. Children's voices and experiences are firmly at the centre of service improvement and delivery.'



## Keeping children close at hand

Efforts to boost local foster caring have captured the public's imagination resulting in more children and young people finding a loving home within the borough

North East Lincolnshire's Foster Friendly scheme is a powerful example of how the council's mission to boost life chances for children and young people has been embraced throughout the borough.

Grimsby Town FC became the first organisation to sign up when it was launched in 2024 by co-owner Jason Stockwood, soon to be Lord Stockwood and now a Government investment minister. Since then, more than 185 businesses and other organisations have joined to date.

By becoming a Foster Friendly organisation they are pledging to support staff who already are – or would like to be – foster carers. Many are also offering offers and freebies to foster carers, such as discounts on eating out.



The council is also the first in the country to launch Foster Friendly schools with almost all schools now on board as well as nurseries and colleges.

The whole campaign has been backed by an imaginative communications strategy utilising social media, videos and press.

In May, North East Lincolnshire became the first local authority in England to launch Care Friends – an app designed to encourage more people to consider fostering. It was backed by a powerful advert directed by



international film director Jack Spring, filmed in Grimsby and Cleethorpes and featuring local actor Tommy Turgoose (pictured above), star of This is England and also the borough's first fostering ambassador.

Together they form part of the children's services' sufficiency strategy which is aiming to ensure more children can be cared for within the borough. Too many youngsters were being placed to far-flung locations from Scotland to south of London, causing disruption to their education and friendships.

The council has revised its package of support for foster carers and it now includes training and development of carers and a new fairer allowance model. It also brings together wraparound support in their home with a Team Around the Family approach, bringing together all practitioners who work with the child – and crucially, with input from their school.

Foster Friendly has been hugely successful. The number of people coming forward to be foster carers has tripled, those being assessed as potential carers has and existing carers say they feel more valued and supported and better able to promote fostering.