

CABINET

16th February 2021

UPDATE ON CHILDREN'S SERVICES IMPROVEMENT PLAN

Report of the Director for Children's Services

Strategic Aim:	Protecting the vulnerable	
Key Decision: No	Forward Plan Reference: FP/021020	
Exempt Information	No	
Cabinet Member(s) Responsible:	Mr D Wilby, Portfolio Holder for Lifelong Learning, Early Years, SEND, Inclusion, Safeguarding Children & Young People	
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Ward Councillors		

DECISION RECOMMENDATIONS

That Cabinet:

1. Notes the update on the Children's Services Improvement Plan and offers comment on any areas where they feel progress is slower than expected.

1 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to inform Cabinet on the actions taken and progress made in response to the areas for improvement identified by Ofsted.
- 1.2 Further, the Cabinet is invited to share their views on any areas where they feel progress is slower than expected and any further action they believe is required.

2 BACKGROUND AND MAIN CONSIDERATIONS (MANDATORY)

- 2.1 The strategic improvement plan was submitted to Ofsted in June 2020, who confirmed that they had reviewed the action plan and agreed "that it demonstrates an accurate understanding of the findings of the inspection."
- 2.2 A new approach to the governance of improvement was put in place immediately following the Ofsted inspection. The Children's Services Improvement Board

reports directly to Cabinet on progress, reviewing and challenging practice quality in key areas identified by Ofsted. The Board is chaired by the portfolio holder for children's services and includes the member champion for children in care and care leavers, and also the Deputy Director, Legal and Governance, to add an additional level of independent scrutiny and challenge.

2.3 The Children's Improvement Board have continued to meet monthly since the end of March 2020, and this is supplemented by the monthly Children's Practice Oversight Group which informs the Board monitoring of the improvement plan. This complements the existing performance management and quality assurance frameworks.

2.4 The governance structure is available at Appendix A.

3 PROGRESS OF IMPROVEMENT PLAN

3.1 The most recent improvement plan tracker is attached at Appendix B.

MANAGEMENT OVERSIGHT AND DECISION-MAKING TO ENSURE THAT CHILDREN'S CASES ARE COMPREHENSIVELY OVERSEEN AND THAT THEIR PROGRESS IS CLOSELY REVIEWED.

3.2 Management oversight remains a key focus for the service. Robust management oversight and direction underpins all good practice and is a key element of all improvement actions.

3.3 Recent practice reviews undertaken show an improvement in management oversight and robustness in child protection and child looked after cases and evidence follow up of actions and tracking of progress which is positive. We also commissioned an independent report from Ingson Consultancy to look at our progress which found that there has been some progress across the board but that improvements are still required.

3.4 To embed further the changes all team managers will be offered a coaching and mentoring programme to uplift and embed their management skills. Due to the current national lockdown this will now take place in March 2021.

3.5 A key focus is for supervision to be evidenced on all case files. This is a recurring theme, and this is being closely monitored by the Service Manager and Head of Service through monthly dip sampling of cases. Recommendation is for supervision to be included in Children's Social Care performance data so this can be monitored robustly.

3.6 We are introducing a Through Care Team focussing on our looked after children and care leavers to allow for more robust management oversight and to give managers the capacity to give clear oversight and be able to track and follow up actions to make sure plans for young people are achieved. Introducing the Through Care Team will make the workload within the current permanence and protection team to be more manageable and will allow our improvement journey to progress further. These changes have been achieved through a re-distribution of existing resources.

3.7 We have re-focussed our quality assurance activity and the Head of Service moderates this activity to ensure compliance and quality of audit is embedded. This

is now a feature of the monthly performance meetings with the focus on identifying themes arising and working with the Principal Social Worker to share learning with staff. Our quality assurance framework has been reviewed and we will be using a dynamic approach using our data to analyse trends and areas for quality assurance analysis. An example of this was an audit of our low number of Child Protection Plans. Having identified this issue we completed an audit of our Child in Need cases to ensure that we were applying thresholds correctly, once satisfied in relation to this we then analysed our threshold decision making at the front door and found that there were some instances of over optimism where we should have progressed as child protection. We have taken this learning and the Team Manager and Service Manager continue to monitor and analyse decision making to ensure this is robust and appropriate.

- 3.8 Feedback from parents/carers and children needs to become better embedded in this learning loop and the participation and engagement lead is working with social care to embed this. We have recently implemented the MyView App for our children in our care and allows them to communicate in alternative ways with our service and offer feedback. We are looking at how this can be utilised more fully across our work with all children and families and how we can develop this to gain feedback to our work completed.

THE QUALITY OF ASSESSMENTS AND PLANS TO ENSURE THAT THEY IDENTIFY NEEDS AND LEAD TO IMPROVEMENTS IN CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING.

- 3.9 We have taken a back-to-basics approach with our staff to revisit essential skills and re-emphasise good quality practice in relation to assessments and planning. Moving from a focus purely on timeliness, we have implemented a series of workshops, led by the Principal Social Worker and Service Manager, starting with writing and using chronologies in assessments. This gives a clear focus to social workers in considering past and current events and how this fuller picture has impacted on the families they are working with.
- 3.10 In the last year we have made progress in relation to assessments and plans, and this is reflected in our performance data. An example of this is the significant improvement in pathway plans being reviewed on time which last year was 25% and this year has risen to 95%. We have also ensured that our assessments have become more timely, while 93% were completed within the 45 days statutory timescales the majority of these were completed at day 44. This year, 96% have been completed within this time frame with 51% of assessments completed in under 40 days, which had led to more focussed and timely intervention for families.
- 3.11 Quality of assessments require ongoing work however we share good practice with staff as case exemplars to encourage peer support and help others with examples of what good looks like. We are role modelling to staff that we require a quality of practice that is also timely, and this is a key focus for us. We are utilising our Signs of Safety¹ training to ensure that our assessments and plans are clear and use family friendly language. When we know that there have been deficits in our practice, we take the opportunity to look at what we could have done differently and put actions in place to ensure that this does not happen in the future. An example of this is

¹ Signs of Safety is a strength based, safety focused approach to working with children and families. It is the preferred model of practice in Rutland.

when a concern was raised regarding how robust an assessment was in relation to a family member who wanted to care for their nephew. We reviewed the assessment and the processes we had in place and identified that as well as ensuring robust supervision was in place, we would ensure that a mid-way meeting was held between all professionals involved to ensure that any areas of concern were being addressed and that we were putting the correct support in place, if needed, at an early stage. This approach has led to more robust assessments which has been commented upon positively within the court arena.

- 3.12 A key focus is to embed the philosophy of 'doing the basics well' and progress from compliance to quality in the work we undertake. Professional curiosity is key to this and how we evidence that practitioners are having challenging discussions with families; evidence of transparent and honest conversations where practitioners are voicing their concerns and what needs to change; and what will happen if concerns continue. The voice of the child needs to be more visible on casefiles and evidence creative direct work with the child, capturing the words of the child without paraphrasing.

COMMISSIONING AND CONTRACT MONITORING ARRANGEMENTS, TO INCREASE THE SUFFICIENCY AND QUALITY OF COMMISSIONED SERVICES, INCLUDING PLACEMENT MATCHING FOR DISABLED CHILDREN AND THOSE WITH COMPLEX NEEDS.

- 3.13 Contract monitoring meetings are taking place monthly with, Lincolnshire County Council (Adoption), Peterborough City Council (Legal Services) and Leicestershire County Council (Out of Hours Service).
- 3.14 We have a much-improved relationship and communication with the out of hours service and have provided training in relation to recording of contacts. There is weekly contact between Service Manager and Team Managers across Rutland and Leicestershire to ensure progress is maintained.
- 3.15 There is good communication between Rutland and Lincolnshire, and Rutland benefits from the high-quality adoption services Lincolnshire offer. The issue raised by Ofsted in relation to the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) role has been addressed and from October 2020 the role of ADM has returned to Rutland.
- 3.16 The legal services contract works well for Rutland. The head of children's legal services and head of children's social care meet monthly and there has been constructive challenge on both sides regarding the quality of work. The current service level agreement has been expanded to include legal advice for Rutland Agency Decision Maker regarding adoption cases as this was identified as a gap.
- 3.17 The children's commissioning group meets six weekly, chaired by the Interim Director of Children's Services. This group has reviewed and simplified the operating protocol for the commissioning of placements (including children with complex needs and disabled children) and clarified the role of the commissioning team, social care and SEND panel. Work is ongoing with Leicestershire about the quality assurance of placement providers on the Framework, and Rutland have identified a manager who will be the Rutland link to this work.

THE HOUSING OFFER FOR VULNERABLE YOUNG PEOPLE AND CARE LEAVERS, INCLUDING ADDRESSING THE USE OF BED AND BREAKFAST

ACCOMMODATION.

- 3.18 We are clear that bed and breakfast accommodation is not an option for our young people. There is a new housing protocol for homeless 16/17-year-olds in place and being adhered to. There is now clarity about the offer to vulnerable young people about their housing options and management sign off on this decision. The service manager completes a quarterly audit to ensure that the housing protocol is being adhered to.
- 3.19 At the time of the Ofsted inspection, there was one young person living in bed and breakfast accommodation. This young person has been supported into his own flat in an area of his choice, he has secure employment and is thriving in his environment. His Personal Advisor has worked hard to build a positive working relationship with him and enable this change in circumstance. Currently all of our Care Leavers are appropriately housed, and we continue to closely monitor this to ensure that they have the support needed to ensure they can maintain their tenancies.
- 3.20 We want to increase the number of children who benefit from 'Staying Put'² arrangements with their foster carers and have updated our staying put policy to make this offer clearer to all involved. We are already looking at 2 more staying put arrangements this year and with a number of young people reaching 18 we are being proactive in having these discussions with carers around this. A key focus for us is the need to recruit more local foster carers to achieve this. COVID-19 has impacted on our recruitment campaign planning. We now have a plan in place to commission a campaign and ensure this is launched by 10th May 2021 to coincide with foster carer fortnight.
- 3.21 We are looking at how Rutland responds to the local issue of housing and linking in with work in the local plan regarding affordable, single occupancy housing for our young people leaving care and in need of housing support. This work initially stalled due to the response to Covid-19 being a priority but is progressing now.

THE USE OF THE PRE-PROCEEDINGS PHASE OF THE PUBLIC LAW OUTLINE, TO ENSURE THAT PARENTS CAN MAKE CHANGES WITHIN A LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND THAT CHILDREN COME INTO CARE WHEN THEY NEED TO.

- 3.22 When a social worker is concerned about the welfare of a child, they may invite parents to a Public Law Outline Meeting (PLO)³ or a pre-proceedings meeting. These meetings are called if the Local Authority and the Social Worker are concerned about the care that a child is receiving and they may make an application to the Court to see if the Court will make orders to protect the child.
- 3.23 Ofsted identified that the use of these pre-proceedings' meetings were not consistent or always timely enough. Since Ofsted, all previous cases in PLO have stepped down from PLO, and we currently have no cases within a PLO arena.

² 'Staying Put' refers to an arrangement where young people remain with their foster carers following their 18th birthday. They are not 'looked after' by the Local Authority but remain with their foster carers on a supported living basis.

³ The Public Law Outline (PLO) sets out the duties local authorities have when thinking about taking a case to court to ask for a Care Order to take a child into care or for a Supervision Order to be made.

- 3.24 We have discussed with legal the learning from the last year in relation to our care proceedings cases and are looking at some learning events regarding threshold for care proceedings. In addition to this our new managers have more robust management challenge and scrutiny in relation to legal planning.
- 3.25 We have reduced the number of care proceedings we have had this year and of the care proceedings we have had the care planning has been focused. It is positive that despite the Covid-19 pandemic, the timeliness of our care proceedings has been good.

Case Example – Child B was a child who came into the care of the Local Authority following his mother being very unwell and no longer able to care for him and his father stating he did not want to care for him. Despite Covid-19 our social workers were able to work closely with the family to secure a long-term family placement for him with a special guardianship order being made to his aunt. In her judgement in concluding the care proceedings the judge noted the robust assessment and approach of the Local Authority and the positive outcome achieved for B.

EARLY PERMANENCE PLANNING FOR CHILDREN.

- 3.26 Permanence planning meetings have been taking place monthly and have allowed the service manager to have robust oversight of cases and plans. A permanence tracker is used to ensure no child is allowed to 'drift' in care. This is updated weekly, and the head of service has oversight of this. We continue to work hard to ensure that we have good long-term plans in place for a looked after children who have been in our care for some time and are working towards ensuring all have permanent homes. The Service Manager meets weekly with the Team Manger to support progress on priority cases and ensure that action plans are clear and management rationale is on file regarding the progress.
- 3.27 We have revised the role of the 'children in care/ at risk of care' panel, chaired by the head of service, and this panel follows up all new or potential placements to ensure there is no delay in planning for permanency, and that children are appropriately matched with carers.
- 3.28 We have concluded a number of care proceedings and have reunified children into parental or family care. There is robust oversight of the plans for children in our care and progress is being made with securing permanency. We are ensuring that our care proceedings conclude with clear plans in place for our children. We have secured adoption for one child this year with a second placed with adopters. We have also had care plans of adoption for 4 more children to be placed before the court - this is a significant change for Rutland who have had limited numbers of adoptions historically.

THE TIMELINESS OF FOSTER CARER ANNUAL REVIEWS.

- 3.29 All foster carer reviews are completed within timescales and the Fostering Panel has robust oversight of these. Foster carers are invited to attend Panel for their reviews and the Panel offers constructive challenge to ensure quality of fostering assessments and reviews remains good. We have ensured that our panel have had appraisals this year and we continue to develop the robust approach of our panel.

4 CONSULTATION

4.1 This report is for information only.

5 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

5.1 No Applicable

6 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

6.1 None identified- the plan is delivered within the children's services budget.

7 LEGAL AND GOVERNANCE CONSIDERATIONS

7.1 There are no legal or governance considerations.

8 DATA PROTECTION IMPLICATIONS

8.1 A Data Protection Impact Assessments (DPIA) has not been completed.

9 EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

9.1 An Equality Impact Assessment has not been completed as it is not deemed relevant to this report.

10 COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

10.1 None Identified

11 HEALTH AND WELLBEING IMPLICATIONS

11.1 None Identified

12 CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY OF REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS

12.1 There has been much progress made since the Ofsted inspection in March. It is acknowledged that children's services are not yet consistently good and there remains a challenge in continuing to improve and sustain those improvements.

12.2 Workforce planning is central to our improvement and is a key risk to sustaining improvement. Whilst we have recruited to our vacancies during the Covid pandemic, virtual recruitment has been challenging and has not always led to the right people being in post. We have taken swift action to address this and while our social work stability has improved this is still a key area of focus for us, particularly at management level. Working remotely is a challenge in terms of building a supportive team culture and environment and helping staff to feel secure around taking steps to improve practice and, more importantly, offering stability and consistency to children, young people and their families.

12.3 Recruitment to the remaining vacant posts is ongoing; we currently have one agency Social Worker in the service, which is an improved position for us, but we want to

move to a position with no agency workers in the service. Our Frontline⁴ students are now in post and have integrated well into the team. They will be qualified social workers in our service from September 2021 which will give us stability and resilience in terms of social work staffing. In joining the Frontline programme and employing some newly qualified social workers we are growing our own social workers who are clear on the service expectations in Rutland and the standards that are expected.

- 12.4 It is clear that the pandemic has impacted upon our rate of progress and hindered plans at different times throughout the last 10 months. We are however proud of the work our social workers have undertaken and how they have adapted to a challenging working environment. We have ensured that our vulnerable children and young people have continued to be seen, face to face and receive a service from us to ensure their safety and wellbeing.
- 12.5 We have used external challenge from Ingson Consultancy and our regional peer challenge conversations, to test ourselves, to inform our self-assessment, and to test that our own analysis is accurate. We are confident that we are making progress and that we know the areas that require attention to improve.
- 12.6 Our Ofsted Annual Engagement Meeting took place on 21st January 2021 during this meeting we were able to highlight the areas we have improved upon this year and areas that require further improvement. Ofsted are likely to undertake a focussed visit to Rutland in April/May 2021 and we will be able to evidence further our improvement. Following our meeting with Ofsted we will be refreshing the improvement plan to focus down on stubborn areas of practice which require improvement as well as quality assurance.
- 12.7 The challenge moving forward is to build a strong and stable management team who can lead and inspire our social workers to improve practice and to maintain this. The support programmes in place will assist our managers in this task as well as clear role modelling by senior management.
- 12.8 While we still require improvement to be good, we have made good progress in our improvement journey. We know that there is still work to do to continue to improve and sustain improvement, and we have a sharp focus on improving the quality of practice and robust management support.
- 12.9 It is recommended that the Cabinet notes the actions taken in response to the areas for improvement identified by Ofsted and offers comment on any areas where they feel progress is slower than expected.

13 BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 13.1 There are no additional papers to the report.

⁴ The Frontline programme is a nationally recognised programme for high potential university leavers and career changers to qualify as Social workers. The two-year programme offers a route into a career in children's social work.

14 APPENDICES

14.1 Appendix A – Improvement Governance Arrangements

14.2 Appendix B – Children’s Services Improvement Plan Tracker

A Large Print or Braille Version of this Report is available upon request – Contact 01572 722577.