

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

30 September 2021

REVIEW OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES OFSTED IMPROVEMENT PLAN

Report of the Strategic Director of Children and Families

Strategic Aim:	Protecting the vulnerable	
Exempt Information	No	
Cabinet Member(s) Responsible:	Cllr David Wilby: Portfolio Holder for Education and Children's Services	
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Ward Councillors	N/A	

DECISION RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Committee:

1. Notes the progress of the Children's Services Improvement Plan in response to the areas for improvement identified by Ofsted 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 Committee on the progress of actions taken in response to the areas for improvement identified by Ofsted.
- 1.2 Further, the Committee is invited to share their views on any areas where they feel progress is slower than expected and how these might be mitigated.

2 BACKGROUND AND MAIN CONSIDERATIONS

- 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 has 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.

3 PROGRESS OF IMPROVEMENT PLAN

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

3.2 Workforce Stability.

Social worker recruitment has continued throughout the Covid-19 period; this has included taking on Frontline trainee social workers and supporting them with children's social care placements. Children's Social Care is now fully staffed and has recruited permanently to all posts. Since the last scrutiny committee, our senior leadership and management team are fully staffed permanently. This has given much needed stability to the Service.

Throughout the last year there has been a lot of support around wellbeing. The organisation has been using monthly 'pulse' surveys to check on staff wellbeing and has facilitated wellbeing sessions. The Leadership team has also established staff and management continuous engagement process. There is a new employee assistance service through Health Assured which has been introduced because of staff feedback. This offers free counselling services for staff and their families.

We continue to invest in our managers. All team managers have received First line Management training which has a strong focus on supporting managers to become more confident in managing staff and teams. We have also invested in external coaching and mentoring for our social care managers to help drive up standards in supervision.

On 6th September 2021 we successfully recruited to the post of Principal Social Worker. The post will have a focus on quality assurance and learning and on developing a workforce strategy and career progression framework which will aid retention of children's services staff.

The children's workforce is now embedding the Signs of Safety practice model.¹ A training and workforce development plan is in place and has been implemented across the whole safeguarding system. There is evidence of better analysis of risk based on evidence and a focus on effective safety planning with the family and their own network of support.

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.

We have also updated our supervision template to include the Signs of Safety model. This has resulted in much more reflective practice, creating opportunities for staff to present the case from the child or young person's perspective. All staff now have regular supervision which is structured, and our managers are recording clear rationale for their case decisions.

There is a direct correlation on impact of supervision with improved quality in assessments and risk identification. This has been evidenced with the notable increase of positive feedback from families and partner agencies about the quality of our assessment and interventions; and the difference this is making in terms of outcomes.

Case Example – child F now 16 years old came into care when she was 15 following a relationship breakdown with her father due to arguments about her interactions with older males. Following a review of the case it was clear that child F's relationship with her father needed support and could be repaired. Children social care worked hard with the young person and her father offering specialist support for mediation with the view of transitioning the young person back home. Social care listened to the young person's wishes and feelings and the views of other critical partner agencies including the Head of Virtual School to ensure that any planned transition back home took into consideration the young person's education agenda including key GCSE assessment dates. Child F has successfully returned home and has developed a positive relationship with her father where they both feel there is a balance of choice and boundaries.

3.3 Quality of Practice

Regular reviews of Child in Need and Child Protection cases are now embedded, led by the Head of Service. Progress and improvements are fed back at the monthly Children's Improvement Board. Our initial audits in 2020 told us that children aged 5 and under were the main cohort experiencing repeat cycles of referrals and assessments. This was due to lack of professional curiosity, a lack in depth of assessment, and quality of management decision and oversight was not robust. As a result, improvements have been made to ensure robust decision making and threshold application at the front door is appropriate.

We have not seen an increase in Children Looked After due to our assessment procedures becoming efficient, so that families are being offered support services where it will work.

Through improved working with Early Help, we are now providing edge of care support by facilitating Reducing Parental Conflict training sessions. This was rolled out in March 2021 and includes a focus on military families.

Recent audits are now consistently showing:

- Thresholds are applied appropriately, and cases are managed at the right level
- Management oversight decisions are supported with a robust rationale

- Good multi-agency working and recording of agency views
- Good understanding of the child's needs
- The voice of the child is evident. There is evidence of good quality of direct work demonstrating the views of children and families is at the heart of what we do.
- Effective use of Safety Plans and Family Plans
- Evidence of meaningful relationships working relationship with children and families
- Early implementation of a CIN plan where long-term support is identified
- Areas of risk are clearly identified through Signs of Safety framework

Case Example – child X is 9 months old, a referral was received following an incident of domestic abuse between the parents. Although this is the first known incident to social care, appropriate threshold application for early intervention and support was implemented at the first point of contact and the case was allocated to a social worker. A comprehensive child and family assessment was completed with a particular focus on how the parents will ensure safe home environment for child X. A robust plan using 'words & pictures' was completed outlining what practical steps the parents needs to take to increase safety and how they will be supported by partner agencies and wider family network to achieve this.

It is very likely that without this early intervention at the first point of contact, volatile parental dynamics would have continued resulting in a crisis situation requiring the highest end of safeguarding measures.

3.4 Performance Information.

Since the inspection report in March 2020, we have made progress across all Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) with a focus on sustaining good practice. The Children's Social Care monthly performance report has highlighted key areas of improvements.

Performance data is a standing agenda items in Team and Service Meetings. All staff have access to performance data and are encouraged to take ownership of the performance of their allocated caseloads. This has had a service wide positive impact in terms of collective ownership in service improvements.

In terms of key performance indicators, one that we closely monitor is repeat referrals within 3 months and 12 months, where children are 'stuck' in a revolving door into social care, in a cycle of referral and assessment, but only receiving help at crisis point. In 2021 we have seen significant improvements with 0% repeat referrals month in month from April 2021. There has been a cultural shift in practice where the emphasis is on front loading all the support and intervening early which can help stop problems spiraling out of control.

Children social care use key local and national performance indicators to track and inform performance. Service Improvement Plans are in place, and monthly data scorecards provide detailed and timely information about the progress against these indicators. Q1 2021-22 performance overview shows on-going positive progress in meeting KPIs. These are now becoming sustained.

3.5 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.

The Children's Commissioning Group continues to oversee these arrangements. 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).

Where operational performance issues have been identified, there is a clear action plan about how we will progress these.

There is a continuous level of engagement being maintained with positive working relationships across the board. Monthly meetings have been useful to resolve any practical problems quickly including improved communication between RCC social care teams and providers.

The contract with Lincolnshire was extended in May 2021 for a further 18 months. There is good communication between Rutland and Lincolnshire, and Lincolnshire will be presenting the annual report and updates on activity for Rutland children at our next Corporate Parenting Board on 4th October 2021.

The head of legal services and Head of Service meets 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. There has been a significant decrease in court proceedings activity, with no new incoming cases, and the long-standing cases being concluded. This will have a positive financial implication on expenditure and legal costs. The working together agreement is due to be renewed and this is being reviewed jointly by PCC Legal Services and Rutland County Council Principal Solicitor.

The contract with Leicestershire County Council was renewed in August 2021. The Out of Hours Service now provide Rutland County Council with weekly updates activity relating to Rutland children and families. This is provided to Head of Service, Service Manager and Front Door Team Manager and allows for themes and profiling of cases.

3.6 The housing offer for vulnerable young people and care leavers, including addressing the use of bed and breakfast accommodation.

Our housing offer for vulnerable young people and care leavers has continued to remain robust. We have not placed any young person in bed and breakfast accommodation, and we remain clear that this is not a viable option.

Social care staff and housing colleagues are jointly trained on the new housing protocol with an emphasis of early joint work when risk of homelessness is first identified.

Head of Service has regular 'keeping in touch' meetings with Housing Team Manager to maintain relationships, discuss themes and any key issues arising.

Young people in different situations will need different types of housing and support, ranging from a 'Staying Put' arrangement with foster carers, 24/7 supported housing or their own independent flat with floating support. When preparing young people leaving care in their transition into adulthood, we ensure that they are given the opportunity to consider their housing options and that they are supported to gain the skills for increasing independence, including managing a household, finance, and budgeting.

Case example – In July 2021, 21-year-old care leaver was facing eviction from private rented accommodation from the landlord due to anti-social behaviour. The landlord had provided a written letter as notice with an imminent eviction date. Children Social Care worked very closely with Housing and completed a joint review of the case. Head of Service for children social care enlisted the support and prioritisation of the case by Housing Team Manager. This resulted in an immediate review by Housing of all the relevant paperwork including tenancy agreement and eviction notice. It transpired that due process had not been followed by the landlord. Housing colleagues were able to support with signposting the care leaver to access legal support. The landlord has been advised that he will need to follow due process and cannot evict the care leaver without the correct eviction notice. Early identification of need and good joint working has allowed social care to explore alternative accommodation in a planned way and avoid the care leaver from facing homelessness.

We have increased the number of care leavers who benefit from 'Staying Put'² arrangements with their foster carers. The fostering and recruitment campaign was launched in May 2021 and there is work underway to recruit more local foster carers to increase a local offer for our children and young people who are looked after.

3.7 Early permanence planning for children.

Permanence planning meetings continue to take place monthly and are chaired by the Head of Service. A permanence tracker is used to ensure no child is allowed to 'drift' in care. This is presented at the monthly Children's Practice Oversight Group which is chaired by the Director of Children's Services

Permanency arrangements are robustly developed and there continues to be a sense of urgency in finding permanent homes for children. For children who cannot return home permanently and whom adoption has been the plan, we have been successful in obtaining placement orders following care proceedings.

There is evidence of good practice for our children who are placed outside the local authority with clear plans and arrangements around their education and health.

Good quality life story work is now routinely being completed with all children in long-term care. There is evidence that is being monitored and referenced at Children Looked After reviews by the Independent Reviewing Officers.

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.

3.8 Areas for continuous development

- Increase number of local foster carers to meet the needs of Rutland children
- Sustain the improvement in quality of practice in order that 'good' practice becomes 'business as usual'
- Continue to work with partners around the updated Children's Services offer
- Workforce strategy to aid retention of staff

4 **CONSULTATION**

4.1 This report is for information only.

5 **ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS**

5.1 Not applicable.

6 **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

6.1 Our lower number of Children Looked After because of improved permanency planning has had a positive impact on the children's social care placements 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 The local demand for children's services has not seen a notable increase of children on child protection plans or an increase in a number of children becoming looked after. We are still anticipating and assessing Covid-19 impact on children and families.

12.2 Strategic service change work is ongoing in relation to our children's services strategy where safeguarding children remains our key priority and focus. The new

children's services strategy will be published in October.

- 12.3 We will be updating our Children's Services self-assessment in October and November to reflect the progress made over the last 18 months and identify areas for further development. This will lead to a new development plan which will focus on sustaining change and progress to ensure improvements made are maintained.

13 BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 13.1 There are no additional papers to the report.

14 APPENDICES

- 14.1 Appendix A – Children's Services Improvement Plan Tracker

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