
DB/KC

17 February 2016

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Dear Tim

Rutland County Council Children's Services Peer Review

Thank You for inviting us to undertake a peer review of Rutland Children's Services. Myself and my colleagues would like to take this opportunity to thank you and your team for your hospitality. We had a very enjoyable two days and took a number of innovative practices back to our own Local Authorities.

I am writing to outline our findings and conclusions from the peer review on 27th and 28th January. As you know the review team comprised of myself as the lead Director, Janice Spencer (Assistant Director of Children's Services, Lincolnshire County Council), Tara Jones (Head of Service, Lincolnshire County Council), Dawn Godfrey (Group Manager, Social Work Services, Nottinghamshire County Council), supported by Mark Lambell and Daniel Routledge (SDSA).

You asked us to review your preparation for Ofsted, commenting on the improvement journey and progress and in particular in relation to LAC, Care Leavers, and Adoptions. Our scope was as follows:

- 1) Reviewing preparation for Ofsted
 - a. Overall Ofsted readiness
 - b. Reviewing Annex A
 - c. Mitigate the impact of Raise and SharePoint
- 2) Commenting on the improvement journey
- 3) Is the focus for improvement on the right issues?

Prior to the review we were able to access a range of documents which ensured we had an understanding of some of the issues prior to our arrival. We were also able to look at case files through your systems. We used a Signs of Safety template for each of our meetings and audits and to structure this feedback.

We also discussed our thinking with Colin Pettigrew, Corporate Director Children, Families and Cultural Services, who was the Quality Assurance Director for the review.

What's working well?

We have definitely seen a journey of improvement with Rutland County Council. There is now sustainable leadership and a focus on workforce development which is not only leading that journey, but was also welcomed by the staff.

The establishment of a Quality Assurance Framework and use of a moderator in audits is a positive step. It was clear from speaking to staff that their optimism and confidence in the future had grown.

Members clearly take an active role which has helped foster closer collaboration and better joint working across your partners, but is also recognised as a strength by staff. We were also told that the relationships across the LSCB have significantly improved over the last twelve months and we found evidence of multi-agency challenge and audit which has directly led to improved practice.

The team felt the steps taken to re-establish corporate parenting were positive and felt that Members were particularly ambitious to ensure all Looked After Children reached the highest possible levels of achievement at all Key Stages.

We also found the work to integrate the process of care planning for looked after children, SEND, and PEP reviews to be very impressive and this, we felt, was an example of good practice that many in the country would want to replicate.

It seemed to us that you have made good ground in ensuring a great school engagement in the work of the Children's Trust and of the wider agenda of children services. We saw evidence that there was a wide range of Early Help services to the children and young people of Rutland and that there was a political commitment to keep these provisions even in the current financial climate. The Early Help staff were very impressive in describing the impact they have on improving outcomes for families.

Tapestry is an example of good practice to share early learning with families and provides an online mechanism to monitor children's early development which is valued by families. The CSE hub has recently been praised by Ofsted as part of your partner Local Authority's targeted inspection.

We found some staff who were highly, motivated, innovative and creative and also saw some who were very child focussed.

The team also felt that the adoption of Signs of Safety will help to improve practice as it is effectively embedded across the department. We were also very impressed with the outstanding relationship your staff have with colleagues from Housing and how this was leading to good outcomes for Care Leavers.

Indeed the team felt the outcomes for Care Leavers in Rutland were outstanding and it is worth reflecting that one of the Care Leavers we spoke to, who had been through the system in other areas, said "I owe my life to my Social Worker in Rutland".

Ofsted readiness

In terms of the initial focus on your readiness for Ofsted, the team would recommend the following as essential.

Audits need to be ready and available for their arrival, likewise all documentation should be readily to hand. They will need access to systems to work first time and probably a super user to help them with the initial navigation. We felt a 'quick reference guide' for navigating systems and case files might also be helpful to them.

You may wish to arrange for all key files to be downloaded into a zip file in preparation for Inspectors.

The team felt in your context it would be more helpful to talk numbers, rather than percentages, given that relatively low numbers can make percentage shifts seem quite substantial.

It was noted that annex A evidence could be strengthened, particularly with regard to the needs assessment on impact of domestic abuse, mental health and substance use as the Early Help impact analysis I am happy to share these documents.

You may wish to consider strengthening the Quality Assurance process around your evidence chest.

Areas of focus

We felt it is important that at a corporate level there was sufficient capacity to support continued transformation and that there is resilience and commitment to provide the infrastructure required to continue your journey of improvement.

Whilst Signs of Safety is understood by the organisation, it is yet to be fully embedded; we feel this is a positive step for Rutland and one you must continue to embed.

There is a need to ensure a greater level of consistency in management oversight and of reflective practice, this will in turn, we feel, create a more confident workforce.

In some of the cases we have audited, we found a lack of evidence of concurrent care planning around pre-proceedings and PLO. We also felt that further strengthening of information governance in case files was required. You may wish to reflect on your approach to concurrent planning and contingency planning.

Where other local authorities are providers of service on behalf of Rutland County Council, there could be clearer commissioning arrangements to ensure the Authority is receiving effective and value for money services.

In terms of engagement in health, we felt there needed to be more engagement at a strategic level especially in relation to CAMHS for looked after children. You also have the issue where Initial Health Assessments are done in Leicester, which clearly provides a logistical challenge for families and the team wondered if you might be able to look at ways they could be done more locally.

It would be helpful for the LAC designated nurse to have access to the SDQs. It felt to us that the referral pathway for LAC CAMHS was not clearly understood by all stakeholders and further work was needed on this. .

It was clear that foster carers want to and are committed to supporting children in Rutland and RCC should explore additional strategies to recruit, retain and cherish these foster carers. They provide the best advertisement for the service. It was recognised that there is a challenge in providing sustainable support for foster carers due to the small numbers involved and the Council may wish to explore partnering arrangements with another Local Authority to strengthen the service. This has advantages and challenges.

IRO compliance with handbook was discussed and you agreed to make some changes in governance of the IRO arrangements to ensure compliance. -

Recommendations

We felt it was important for you to ensure that the corporate capacity to support the infrastructure required to continue the improvement journey was in place.

We would recommend that corporate parenting could be strengthened further; perhaps this could be done through wider political and corporate engagement using the revision of the strategy as a means to engage.

We believe Signs of Safety to be a useful tool for you to embrace and feel that the continued investment in this will help to increase the skills, confidence of practice of staff within the Local Authority and could also be rolled out wider to include partners.

You may wish to explore partnership possibilities in order to enhance the resilience of the fostering service.

The offer and pathway for CAMHS needs to be clearer, we feel there is an opportunity for the East Midlands to consider a graduate trainee programme and that this would particularly help for Rutland.

There is an opportunity for the SDQs to be triangulated with schools and the young person to offer a richer insight

The provision of a timescale for completion of actions and the evidence of progression should be monitored to complete the loop in the audit process. Also regular reporting on themes from audits and complaints would help inform service planning and in developing practice.

We feel a review to the approach to care planning could help strengthen the processes that exist and support concurrent planning.

It would be worth raising the awareness around information security on case files and taking action on existing files to further strengthen the information governance arrangements in them.

I hope the peer review as helpful and I am happy to provide any additional feedback as requested.

I would be grateful if you could provide a progress report on the recommendations in six months' time to myself and Pete Chilvers.

Yours



Debbie Barnes
Director of Children's Services