

Rutland County Council

Inspection of local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 2 March 2020 to 13 March 2020

**Lead inspector: Alison Smale
Her Majesty's Inspector**

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

Children's social care services in Rutland continue to require improvement to be good and have not improved since the last inspection in 2016. A number of the areas that were identified as needing improvement in the last inspection have not been addressed. Over the last year, leaders have rightly recognised some key weaknesses across the service. Strategic leadership has been strengthened. An improvement plan is being implemented and has had a partially positive impact, resulting in a strong early help service for children and families and an effective front door and assessment service. However, for children who need longer-term support, the service is not good enough.

Children in need, those on a child protection plan, children in care and care leavers do not receive a good service. During the inspection, senior managers accepted that, in some parts of the service, their efforts to address poorer areas of practice have not been assertive enough to bring about the changes that are needed.

What needs to improve

- Management oversight and decision-making to ensure that children's cases are comprehensively overseen and that their progress is closely reviewed.
- The quality of assessments and plans to ensure that they identify needs and lead to improvements in children's well-being.
- 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 housing offer for vulnerable young people and care leavers, including addressing the use of bed and breakfast accommodation.
- 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.
- Early permanence planning for children.
- The timeliness of foster carer annual reviews.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: requires improvement to be good

1. Early help is provided at the earliest opportunity to children and families and this prevents children's needs from escalating. Parents value the support they receive. Children enjoy improved relationships within families and with their peers. Families benefit from a range of effective interventions, such as parenting programmes, strategies for parents to use within the home and therapeutic interventions. All of these make a tangible difference to parents' ability to successfully care for their children and meet their needs.
2. Effective multi-agency partnership working among early help professionals ensures that information is shared through regular team around the child meetings. Parental consent is well understood. Parents are very much involved in the planning and tailoring of strategies so that these work for their children and family. The practice model used by the local authority is well embedded in early help assessments, but these assessments do not always capture the wider family context or historical factors. Early help plans are not well enough developed and do not reflect the good work being undertaken with families.
3. An effective integrated approach to early help and children's social care contacts has recently been established. The early help coordinator and a dedicated front door social worker work alongside each other to ensure a suitable response to all contacts and referrals. Children's needs and risks are identified and responded to in a timely and proportionate way. Threshold decisions are appropriate, and parental consent is routinely sought. The early

sharing of information with schools, when there has been a domestic abuse incident in the family, is positive.

4. The referral, assessment and intervention service (RAIS) team manager provides additional timely oversight to ensure that urgent concerns are addressed promptly. Strategy meetings are held swiftly in response to safeguarding referrals or when such concerns arise during an initial assessment in the RAIS team. These meetings are well attended by partner agencies, including the police, and this ensures that information is shared well to inform effective joint decision-making and action.
5. Children and families benefit from a timely and effective out-of-hours service. Threshold decisions are appropriate, and children are seen and assessed when there are safeguarding concerns. Good liaison with local authority managers takes place to discuss and agree actions. Access to the local authority's recording system ensures that case files can be reviewed outside of office hours, providing an overview of previous involvement and the child's history. Co-location of the out-of-hours service with the police child protection unit ensures good information-sharing and joint working where necessary, for example for strategy meetings and joint visits. However, some low-level contacts are not recorded, so there is no way of checking whether the referrer subsequently proceeded with the referral to the daytime team.
6. Allocation meetings, with contributions from a wide range of key agencies, ensure that information is shared effectively and that the right agency contributes to the ongoing assessment. On occasion, this causes a short delay in allocation. Once allocated, social workers see and respond to children's needs in a way that is appropriate and proportionate to their needs. Assessments completed by RAIS team social workers are of good quality. They clearly capture the needs of children based on a comprehensive overview of their lived experience. Assessments are completed within appropriate timescales and incorporate the views of children and family members. Informative health and education updates are routinely provided. All family members are considered. Efforts are made to involve absent parents. Relevant extended family members are included in assessments to contribute to safety planning, especially when they are being considered as protective factors.
7. In the RAIS team, children and families benefit from effective help. Support is enhanced by co-work between social workers and early help services. This enables social workers to access more intensive targeted support for families, as well as local services or commissioning for more specialist needs. Partnership working is strong for these families. Social workers have good working relationships with partner agencies, including the army welfare services for children and families who live in the local armed forces bases.

8. Engagement with children is well embedded in practice within the RAIS team. A range of tools which are tailored to get the best from children in terms of their wishes and feelings are used well by social workers. When children are reluctant to engage, social workers persevere and adapt their approach to good effect.
9. Initial child protection conferences consider potential harm to children and make sound decisions about whether children need to become subject to a child protection plan. However, there is too little consideration within conferences of children's views. When children experience chronic neglect or domestic abuse, the impact on their longer-term well-being is not sufficiently well addressed within child protection conferences. The individual needs of children within large sibling groups are not thought through thoroughly enough. Some children are stepped down from a child protection plan too soon. Progress already made is not always sustained, leading to a high number of re-referrals and some children requiring repeat child protection plans.
10. Child protection plans are well constructed in terms of identifying areas of need and setting clear goals. However, at subsequent core group meetings progress is measured in terms of family attendance or engagement in services and does not relate back to the well-defined outcome measures that were initially set. This reduces the understanding about whether work with children and families is achieving real and sustainable change. This also means that progress for children is not sufficiently well defined and is instead based on the actions of adults in their lives rather than the impact on children in terms of their needs being met, or not.
11. Children who require extended intervention are allocated to the protection and permanency service (PAPS). In longer-term children in need work, the effectiveness of work with families is inconsistent. For instance, when children who are subject to a child protection plan are stepped down to a child in need plan, their ongoing needs are not sufficiently well identified or addressed. This reduces the effectiveness of children in need planning and support. Families are not always challenged when circumstances deteriorate, or when children's needs are not being met. Children's longer-term outcomes are not considered well enough. Plans for siblings are not sufficiently tailored to individual children.
12. Participation and direct work with children and families are not well embedded in social work practice in the PAPS team. When direct work is undertaken, it does not inform ongoing assessments and plans sufficiently well.
13. Children who are educated at home, on part-time timetables or who are accessing alternative provision are monitored as closely as possible by schools and the inclusion team to ensure that they are safeguarded.

14. Social workers supporting disabled children know children well, and most of these children receive a good service. For a very small number of children, the challenge to find the right placement has resulted in work with families being inappropriately redefined as child protection. While this structured approach has achieved better experiences for children, child protection status is not always the best route to achieve this, and it has the potential to cause unnecessary distress for parents.
15. There has been an inconsistent response to the very small number of young people who present as homeless. Some are offered the opportunity to become looked after, whereas others are not. Assessments are not always updated in response to this significant change in young people's circumstances. This means that young people remain in vulnerable living situations. Senior managers agreed to review the current process.
16. The response to allegations against professionals is timely and effective.
17. The response to children who are at risk of exploitation outside of the family is mostly robust. A highly skilled exploitation practitioner is strategically placed in the front door team. These risks are recognised early and children who are allocated to the exploitation worker receive a persistent and thorough response. Early help services provide effective targeted support. Opportunities to support children in need within the PAPS team who are at risk of exploitation are sometimes not identified and children do not receive the right support soon enough.
18. The quality of management oversight of frontline practice varies significantly between different parts of the service. Early help workers benefit from regular and up-to-date reflective supervision. Management oversight in the RAIS team is regular and progresses decisions for children. In the PAPS team, however, management oversight of frontline practice is not frequent or of sufficient value to progress and improve children's circumstances. Action by senior managers to mitigate the impact of this for children has not been sufficiently effective.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: requires improvement to be good

19. Use of the pre-proceedings phase of the public law outline (PLO) is not well developed or effective. The quality and timeliness of decision-making about whether children become looked after vary between teams and this means that, for some children, decisive action is not taken soon enough. As a consequence, they continue to experience neglectful parenting and most children enter care in a crisis. Better practice in the RAIS team means that when children are subject to an initial assessment, the need for alternative care is recognised and considered at an early stage of children's social care

involvement. For these children, pre-proceedings are considered appropriately, and the viability of friends and relatives as alternative carers is considered early. Pre-birth assessments are initiated effectively in the RAIS team when there are concerns about potential future care.

20. Securing early permanence for some children with more complex needs is a challenge and is not always achieved soon enough. This is because the local authority's approach to finding placements for children with more complex needs is not sufficiently effective. This means that these children are not initially in well-matched placements. Some children's needs escalate, and others experience unnecessary placement disruption.
21. Assessments of children in care do not sufficiently reflect all of their needs. They are not routinely updated when circumstances change. Care plans are not clear enough about how the overarching objective for children will be achieved. Some plans are incomplete or are not approved by a manager. When children are subject to family court proceedings, assessments and plans are more structured, but they are not always aligned with children in care plans. Parenting assessments are not sufficiently detailed or analytical, and appropriate specialist expertise is not consistently evident in these assessments.
22. Child in care reviews are held regularly. Children are increasingly encouraged to attend these meetings and they have access to advocacy support in meetings when they want to get their views heard. Some children have chaired their own review meeting. However, some children's views are not reflected because they are wrongly considered by independent reviewing officers (IROs) to be too young. Decision-making for children can be disjointed. Decisions made by different panels and managers are not sufficiently aligned and this undermines the consistent follow-through of actions. IROs appropriately escalate concerns to social workers and their managers, but resolution is not tracked, so it is unclear whether issues have been successfully resolved.
23. Most children enjoy good relationships with their social workers. Positive work is undertaken by social workers using words and picture storyboards to help children to understand their experiences and the decisions that affect their lives. However, children do not benefit from continued life-story work and opportunities to record and keep items which capture important memories are missed. Children's views and wishes are not always captured through direct work to ensure that these contribute meaningfully to plans and decisions about their future.
24. Children's health needs are recognised and followed up. A small number of children in care who are placed out of area have experienced a lack of continuity in their mental health needs being met. Strengths and difficulties questionnaires are routinely completed but are not always considered in

reviews. This means that not all information which could helpfully inform plans and interventions is taken into account.

25. Children in care have positive education experiences. In school, children in care have good attendance and behaviour. Permanent and fixed exclusions for pupils who are in care are low. The virtual school provides good support for schools to produce increasingly effective personal education plans, which include clear targets and the voice of the pupil. The engagement of children in care and care leavers in their education and pathway plans is improving.
26. Children enjoy many opportunities for leisure and fun. Activities are encouraged and supported, for example swimming, martial arts and play. Some care leavers are taking up the offer of leisure passes.
27. The vast majority of children are well matched and enjoy secure placements with carers who meet their needs. Family members are actively considered to care for children, and children live with family and friends when this is in their best interests. Foster carers and extended family members are encouraged to take up special guardianship orders. However, carers lack confidence in the local authority to offer the ongoing support that they need. The special guardianship support offer is not coherent enough or communicated well to these carers.
28. Formal decisions to secure children's permanence are not made soon enough. Too many children in care and their carers have not received formal confirmation that they can remain together in the long term, despite having lived as a family for many years and being well settled. Senior managers have been slow to introduce systems and processes to ensure that plans for children's permanence are formally confirmed at the earliest opportunity. Senior managers have recently sharpened their focus on this area and have introduced tracking and monitoring systems to ensure that permanence decisions for these children become timelier. This is starting to have a positive impact.
29. The fostering service is undergoing a period of change, which includes a newly constituted fostering panel and new managerial arrangements. The team is committed and enthusiastic, and supervising social workers support foster carers well. There have been shortfalls in managerial oversight, resulting in some poorer practice in, for example, the matching and placement of some children and the timeliness of foster carer annual reviews. These shortfalls have been identified and are gradually being addressed.
30. Adoption work is contracted to another local authority. This arrangement has been in place since April 2019 and is working well. The other local authority has already had a successful recruitment campaign to encourage Rutland residents to consider adoption. It delivers well for Rutland's children. Adopter assessments are robust, and the matching of children is well considered.

Adoption support is being developed further to enable Rutland adopters to access the services provided by the other local authority. The local authority is not clear enough about agency decision-maker arrangements. Senior managers have agreed to review this.

31. Care leavers told inspectors that their personal advisers care about them and provide them with support when they need it. Most care leavers have an updated pathway plan, although they are not reviewed with sufficient regularity. Pathway plans are not used well enough to identify young people's needs or to shape planning for care leavers to ensure that they receive all the support and entitlements that they need or are entitled to. Most care leavers move on from school to further education, employment or training. Some go on to study at university with great success.
32. The local accommodation offer to care leavers is not sufficient, and senior managers are in the process of addressing this. Young people are drawn to city life and this presents challenges in terms of commissioning suitable accommodation in the location of young people's choice. However, overall, not enough has been done to ensure that care leavers receive the right support at the right time to meet their needs. A very small number of vulnerable care leavers have been offered bed and breakfast accommodation; this should have been avoided, with more proactive forward planning. Senior managers confirmed that the use of bed and breakfast accommodation is not in line with procedures and now plan to ensure that all staff and managers are aware of this.
33. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive an effective service which meets their needs. The local authority has commissioned effective support for these children and this supports them to integrate into life in the United Kingdom and do well.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: requires improvement to be good.

34. Overall, children's services in Rutland have not improved since the last inspection in 2016. However, over the last year, leaders have recognised some key weaknesses across the service. Strategic leadership has been strengthened, with the appointment of a new director of children's services (DCS), deputy director of children's services and a head of service. Their service self-evaluation is broadly accurate, and senior managers have begun to address deficits in practice. As a result of action already taken, some areas of the service have improved. Early help is strong. The front door service is effective, and the assessments undertaken by the RAIS team are of a high standard.
35. Senior managers have not tackled poor management practice effectively soon enough. As a result, practice remains highly inconsistent in some parts of the

service. Senior managers have agreed that they need to take stronger action, and provided inspectors with a clear plan to ensure that progress in this area is achieved more promptly.

36. The lead member for children's services has prioritised the needs of children through active attendance at key committees and boards, including the corporate parenting board. The corporate parenting board has set high standards, underpinned by the principle of 'Would this be good enough for my child?'. Performance is scrutinised and has resulted in some improvements, but senior leaders accept that more needs to be done before services are consistently good.
37. Children in care have become increasingly involved in corporate parenting meetings. Their involvement has resulted in changes in areas that are important to them. However, some of these changes should have been made without the need for children to raise them, such as clarifying policies around pocket money, foster carer profiles provided before placement and, where possible, introductions to new carers. Senior leaders accept this and recognise that there is still more to do to develop meaningful conversations between children and corporate parents, and to follow through on more ambitious actions.
38. The local authority's vision to develop a learning culture within the organisation has been hampered by the quality of frontline management across parts of the service. The support put in place by senior managers to mitigate the impact of this has, at times, been ineffective and disjointed.
39. Strategic commissioning is not sufficiently developed and does not reflect Rutland's unique needs. Some important services are not readily available when needed. The local authority inevitably relies, for some provision, on outsourced services, including out-of-hours cover, adoption and specialist placements. Underdeveloped commissioning arrangements mean that when children need specialist placements, these are difficult to source. Overall, contract monitoring and the quality assurance of these arrangements are not sufficiently robust and are over-reliant on informal communication.
40. The local authority has begun to develop a more comprehensive approach to evaluating quality. The implementation of this is not yet complete. It is a strength that the quality assurance process includes service user feedback and captures children's views through a range of mechanisms, such as completion of a feedback form by children following a meeting. The analysis of findings from audits through quarterly reports primarily focuses on the quality of audits themselves, rather than practice quality. As a result, they do not inform practice improvement effectively. Senior leaders know this and have firm plans so that audits are more effectively used to improve practice.

41. Performance management is increasingly effective, with comprehensive and accurate performance reports which are understood and followed up. This has led to improvements in some areas of the service. Clear arrangements for challenge are in place between council members and senior officers through scrutiny, cabinet meetings, and one-to-one meetings. The DCS holds regular performance management meetings to monitor and challenge performance. New IROs are now in place and this has improved the quality of the scrutiny and review undertaken by this service. The DCS regularly spends time with frontline staff and IROs, without managers present, to ensure that he hears directly from them about strengths and concerns.
42. Senior managers have recognised and acted to support social workers and frontline managers, having recognised gaps in the frequency and quality of frontline management support. However, this intervention has not been sufficient to provide all social workers with the management support, critical evaluation and direction they need to ensure that plans for children are progressed effectively. This has resulted in a small number of children not making timely progress in their well-being, or experiencing periods of greater vulnerability.
43. Improvements have been achieved and change has been well managed in early help services and in the RAIS team. Staff in these areas of the service feel professionally safe, with constructive challenge, support and modelling of good management. This is not yet consistent across the service. Most staff enjoy working in Rutland and value the breadth of work. Caseloads have become more manageable, enabling social workers to see children regularly and to tailor their work proportionately to the needs of children and their families. However, in the PAPS team, social workers have higher caseloads and the scope of their work can create pressures. This means that social workers sometimes have to prioritise child protection and court work over supporting other children.
44. Staff value the range of development opportunities they receive, which includes specialist training and a range of development opportunities. This is starting to have a positive impact on social work practice, such as the use of words and pictures storyboards to explain to children why decisions are being made. This is a positive example of improving practice.



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