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Dear Ms Godfrey

Focused visit to Rutland children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Rutland children's services on 19 and 20 January 2022. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Rebecca Quested and John Roughton.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in care.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. This visit was carried out partly by remote means. Both inspectors used video calls for some of the discussions with local authority staff. Both inspectors were on site.

Headline findings

Since the last inspection in March 2020, the local authority has maintained a clear focus on protecting children and improving the quality of social work practice in Rutland. Senior leaders know their services well and have focused effectively on an improvement plan despite the challenges of the pandemic. As a result, experiences for children who are looked after have improved. A lack of scrutiny of performance management data, particularly regarding children who are missing from care, is not supporting this improvement journey. Senior leaders recognise this and have plans in place to rectify this.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?

- The accuracy of performance management data, in particular the recording and oversight of children who are missing from care.

Main findings

Children in care are seen regularly by social workers who know them well. This has continued despite the various lockdown restrictions. Social workers spend time with children, completing creative and sensitive life story work to help them understand their experiences. Social workers ensure that children's views inform decision-making. This helps children to feel settled and have their needs met.

Social workers work effectively with colleagues and partners to identify and meet children's holistic needs. Social workers are resourceful in ensuring the right support is in place for children, with well-planned transitions when children move home or school. Children are encouraged to pursue their interests. The virtual school head (VSH) is extremely creative in using a variety of community resources to incentivise children's educational engagement, such as a mentoring service provided by members of the local Premier League football team. This supports children's educational progress.

Children's case files are up to date, with most records, assessments and plans written 'to' the child, in a respectful and sensitive way. Assessments are timely, thorough and informed by the child's voice, helping to ensure that plans are child centred. Social workers ensure that children's plans are clear and timebound with the use of child-friendly language. There is good evidence of managerial oversight, which provides a clear rationale for decision-making.

Children, including disabled children, who are looked after in Rutland live in homes which meet their needs well. Most children are settled where they are living and do not experience unnecessary moves. This means that children are able to develop secure relationships with their carers and a strong local support network.

Early permanence is secured for most children. Permanence is secured swiftly for very young children in Rutland. All the children who left care in the last six months aged under one year had permanent care arrangements through adoption or special guardianship. Comprehensive assessments lead to clear plans for children to live with their families, including when this is abroad, where that is in their best interests.

Children benefit from positive relationships with their independent reviewing officers (IROs). Children are always visited in advance of their reviews to establish their wishes about how the meeting will take place. An effective hybrid model of reviews, which are partly in person and partly virtual, has developed in response to the pandemic. This gives children more choices as to how they and others can contribute, without necessarily having everyone physically present. Midway reviews by IROs to monitor the progress of review recommendations have been successful in ensuring that children's permanence plans are kept on track.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children account for most children who have recently entered care in Rutland. The local authority has responded swiftly and effectively to this new challenge. Social workers have received relevant training and

all children are living in appropriate accommodation which meets their needs. The VSH ensures that children's educational needs are identified promptly and a broad educational offer secured. Children's physical and mental health needs are quickly assessed and timely referrals made according to identified needs, such as to the Refugee Council's therapeutic service. Children's cultural and religious needs are well considered and social workers go to great lengths to ensure that children can access community resources to avoid them being isolated.

Children receive the right support with their physical and mental health. Senior leaders are working with health partners to ensure that a flexible child-led health service is commissioned and delivered for children in care. In the interim, the local authority ensures that children's emotional needs are met through alternative therapeutic services when the child and adolescent mental health services do not provide them and, where problems have occurred identifying an NHS dentist, the local authority is funding private dental care.

Children now receive a seamless and well-planned transition to adulthood through the development of a Throughcare team. Personal assistants become involved with children by the time they are 16 years old and are actively engaged in pathway planning from this point, alongside the social worker. Where it is in the child's best interest, the social worker remains involved after children are 18 years old to support the transition.

Children's participation is improving in Rutland. Children in care are well supported by their social workers, IROs and advocates. They also have access to Rutland's children in care council, the Speak Up Speak Out group, who meet regularly and offer activities including residential trips. Children spoken to by inspectors described these opportunities positively as they enjoyed learning new skills and having fun. Children's case records do not reflect this involvement or its positive impact on the child. Older children are not routinely encouraged to consider, or reconsider, their involvement in participation activities which could benefit them. All the children we spoke to during the visit were positive about how their social workers help them, and all felt that their individual needs were being met. They described being happy, secure and safe.

Opportunities to engage in dialogue with the lead member and senior leaders to shape services for children in care are developing through the participation offer. However, children do not have the opportunity to directly influence service development as they are not represented on the Corporate Parenting Board.

There is improved workforce stability. Senior leaders have developed a range of effective strategies to recruit and support new social workers. Social workers report being well supported both formally and informally by their managers. Their caseloads are manageable, which allows them to build relationships with children. Social workers particularly enjoy having the time to undertake direct work with children, including life story work.

Social workers value supervision, which is often reflective and detailed, demonstrating the authority's investment in supervision skills training for team managers. Managers track the progress of agreed actions within supervision, which mitigates delay for children. Social workers also appreciate the training opportunities available to them. Social workers are enthusiastic about the social work practice model which is being embedded across the authority. It is being used effectively for children in care to ensure a shared understanding of risks and needs.

Senior leaders have demonstrated an active focus on improvement over the last 12 months, which has resulted in significant progress in the quality of social work practice and the experiences of children in care. Managerial oversight is evident from team managers and IROs and is contributing to more effective care planning. The focus on addressing sufficiency issues means that more children benefit from remaining in or close to Rutland and living in a home which meets their needs. There are sufficient homes to consider when matching for most children. However, where necessary, in consultation with the wider professional team around the child, appropriate bespoke arrangements are commissioned which meet children's individual needs. The success of Staying Put means that further recruitment of foster carers is necessary. This remains a focus of senior leaders.

Inaccurate data is impairing individual and strategic planning. There are gaps in the data for children who go missing, which means it is not possible to gain a comprehensive understanding of the prevalence of missing episodes for looked after children. Senior leaders have plans in place to rectify this.

Since the last inspection, the quality assurance framework has been revised. Thematic practice reviews are completed collaboratively with social workers. These highlight practice deficits and good practice. Practice review could be strengthened through consultation with children, parents and carers. Practice reviews are mostly moderated to ensure consistency; however, moderation is not taking place contemporaneously, which means that timely actions to support improvement are not always taken. Managers disseminate themes from practice reviews and showcase good practice examples.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning the next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Rebecca Quested
Her Majesty's Inspector