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Dear Ms Godfrey

Focused visit to Rutland Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Rutland Council children's services on 24 January 2023. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Nhlanganiso Nyathi and Alison Smale.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need, including those children subject to a child protection plan.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

Headline findings

For the significant majority of children in need and those children subject to a child protection plan in Rutland, practice by social workers is increasingly informed by an understanding of each child's day-to-day lived experience. An ambitious and committed senior leadership team is supported by corporate and political leaders who have a clear line of sight of their improvement journey. Senior leaders and managers recognise and prioritise protecting and helping children at risk or in need. Social workers and their managers know their children well. Most children are safer as a result of the help they receive. Senior leaders and managers are realistic about challenges; they know there is more work to do to ensure that all services to children and families are consistently effective. Following a period of insufficient management oversight, senior managers took effective action but there was still a period of time when significant shortfalls in supervision and visits were identified.

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

- The robustness of management oversight so that shortfalls in visits to children and social work supervision are prevented.
- The effectiveness of the quality assurance measures in informing improvements.
- The quality of assessments.

Main findings

Assessments for children in need of help and protection focus primarily on presenting needs and risks and do not sufficiently assess the broader causes. Assessments for disabled children capture the child's particular needs, including their health and educational needs, and how they should be met but lack sufficient detail about wider aspects of the child's family and social life. These inconsistencies in the quality of assessments mean decisions are not always based on a full picture of a children's lived experiences.

Most children have a plan setting out how they will be helped, how their needs are going to be met and how risk will be reduced. However, assessments and plans are not always kept up to date on a regular basis or when there are significant changes in a child's life.

Thresholds are appropriate and are well understood by professionals. When children's needs or risks escalate in early help, their cases are appropriately stepped up to children in need or child protection. When children are at risk of harm, timely strategy meetings are held with key agencies. Strategy discussions and section 47 enquiries are appropriately undertaken to assess risk and make safeguarding decisions. Information that informs clear threshold decisions is appropriately shared. This leads to children and families receiving effective, proportionate and timely interventions, which improve their situation.

Many children and their families benefit from effective services which help to improve their lives. However, there are waiting lists for some services. For example, delays in accessing domestic abuse programmes hinder parents' understanding of the changes they need to make. Managers are aware of this challenge and are exploring appropriate commissioning options.

Information-sharing between agencies and professionals is mostly effective. Most partner agencies engage purposefully in children in need and core group meetings. However, social workers report that child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) do not routinely engage fully with core groups or share information effectively. Insufficient sharing of information between agencies prevents families and professionals from having an up-to-date and more holistic understanding of a child's needs.

Children in need planning meetings for disabled children are held regularly and involve key agencies, who share information and provide updates on progress and any unmet needs.

Children, young people and families benefit from stable and meaningful relationships with social workers. Most children are consistently seen and seen alone by social workers, when it is in their best interests. This ensures children's voices are considered in all work with them. Social workers are proactive in engaging with parents, including those parents who do not live in the family home.

Most social workers know the children they work with well and capture their views about relationships and life at home and in the community. There are good examples of effective direct work with children but not all children are benefiting from this. Some social workers regularly undertake creative direct work with children to capture their views, which help to inform conferences and core group meetings as well as improvements in services.

Social workers working with disabled children see these children regularly and get to know them well. They take time to listen to them sensitively, to understand their wishes and feelings. Visits to disabled children are regular and purposeful, with some excellent evidence of direct work. This contributes to positive relationships between social workers and children and their parents.

Some children have experienced changes of social worker. While most children are seen regularly by their social workers, a small minority of children have not been visited regularly, including those on a child protection plan. A small number of these children were not seen for a prolonged period, while others were visited by different duty social workers. None of these children are recorded as experiencing further harm as a result of these gaps between visits. However, this has hindered children in forming trusting relationships with their social workers and the development of an accurate and up-to-date understanding of children's needs. These shortfalls were directly linked to a lack of sufficient management oversight and supervision. Senior managers have now taken appropriate action to address this.

Conferences are timely but professionals do not always sufficiently consider the child's lived experience. Helpful outline child protection plans and safety plans are developed in conference and further developed by social workers in core groups. These ensure that parents are clear about steps they can take to reduce risks.

Decisions for children to cease to be subject to a child protection plan are appropriate for most children but, for a small minority, are not sufficiently clear about the rationale for reducing or ending involvement. Assessments to inform these decisions are not sufficiently robust.

While child protection chairs routinely escalate concerns, management oversight has not been consistent. Senior managers took action when necessary, but there was

still a period of time when there were significant shortfalls in supervision and visits. Stronger-quality supervision was seen for disability workers. Some case supervision records are written with the child as the potential reader. This will help children to understand later in their lives the rationale for some decisions made about them.

Pre-proceedings are timely and used appropriately. Letters written before proceedings provide families with clarity about the serious nature of concerns and what needs to change to avoid entering the court system and children entering care.

For the very small number of children identified as at risk of child exploitation, appropriate and timely intervention is reducing these risks. However, the daily exploitation risk meeting does not always consider all children who are at high risk of exploitation. Managers are aware of the importance of using appropriate and sensitive language, and relevant training is currently being provided in this area.

Senior managers demonstrate committed leadership, which is backed up by corporate and political leaders' support for children's services. This is evident through protected budgets for social care and children's services. This ensures that services have the right funding for improving the experiences of vulnerable children.

Leaders and senior managers are realistic about the challenges they face and have a shared vision for their improvement journey. A system for measuring the quality and performance of children's services is in place to inform decision-making on improvements. The self-evaluation of service effectiveness is broadly accurate for children in need and those in need of protection.

While the approach to quality assurance has been strengthened, senior managers and leaders are aware that there is more to be done to achieve consistency and strengthen the involvement of practitioners, children and their families in the process and to ensure learning.

Senior managers are committed to embedding a strong learning culture and improving the service. Internally and externally sourced learning has been adopted to strengthen specialist practice in areas such as children at risk of exploitation. Social workers value the regular service events where speakers bring expertise and an opportunity to reflect on practice development. Additionally, social workers benefit from a broad range of other generic training opportunities which they can apply to their practice.

The workforce is relatively stable and social workers like working for Rutland. There is an up-to-date and clear workforce development strategy which informs leaders and senior managers of workforce planning requirements. Social workers have manageable caseloads which reflect the broad nature of their work in a relatively small local authority. Senior managers are alert to the considerable challenges in attracting, recruiting and retaining qualified staff, partly because of the limited

opportunities for progression in a small local authority. To mitigate these challenges, advanced practitioner posts and opportunities in other specialisms have been created, which is a positive development.

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

Yours sincerely

Nhlanganiso Nyathi
His Majesty's Inspector