

# Inspection of Rutland local authority children's services

**Inspection dates:** 15 to 26 April 2024

**Lead inspector:** Rachel Griffiths, His Majesty's Inspector

<b>Judgement</b>	<b>Grade</b>
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care	Good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Since the previous inspection in 2020, when services for children were judged to require improvement, services have improved and they are now good. The improvement in the quality and impact of support provided to children in need of help and protection, children in care and care leavers has been achieved by an established and confident leadership team, committed staff, and good corporate and political support. Early help services, the virtual school and an embedded relationship-based model of practice are particular strengths that are making a positive difference to the lives of children and families in Rutland.

Challenges remain in respect of the stability of the workforce, meaning that some children in care have experienced changes in social workers, and in the sufficiency of homes for children in care and care leavers to live in. Leaders are fully aware of these challenges and have clear action plans in place to address them.

## What needs to improve?

- Children benefiting from consistent help and support from practitioners who know them well.
- The availability and choice of places to live for children in care and care leavers.
- The timeliness of multi-agency strategy meetings.

## The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: good

1. Children in Rutland receive effective and responsive help and protection.
2. Children and families who need early help benefit from a well-coordinated, prompt and effective response. Children and families can access a wide range of interventions. Skilled practitioners, who work with, and alongside, children and families, help to improve children's experiences. This means that, for many children and their families, their lives improve without the need for statutory social work intervention.
3. If children's needs change, nuanced and persistent conversations between managers ensure effective and timely interventions. Thresholds are well understood and applied. As a result, children only step up to have statutory intervention if their needs require this.
4. Skilled social workers respond promptly and effectively to contacts and referrals. Social workers appropriately consider parental consent and whether it should be dispensed with. Sound and timely management oversight of all contacts ensures proportionate responses to children and family's needs.
5. When professionals need advice and guidance about vulnerable children, social workers provide this through an effective consultation line based in the integrated front door.
6. The out-of-hours service, managed by a neighbouring authority, responds to children and family's needs in a timely and proportionate way. However, intermittent issues with IT connectivity mean that workers cannot always access full and up-to-date information about children's histories.
7. When information in referrals identifies risk of harm to children, well-attended strategy meetings lead to effective decisions and actions that safeguard children. Social workers see children promptly. Too often, though, strategy meetings are delayed due to a lack of police capacity. Workarounds by children's social care staff help to ensure children's safety and minimise delay. This means, however, that there are times when social workers have to act without full multi-agency information.

8. Child protection enquiries start promptly. They provide a thorough analysis of children's needs and the level of risk children face. Timely initial child protection conferences help to ensure that appropriate safeguards are in place to protect children.
9. Good-quality direct work undertaken with children and families is impactful and it makes a positive difference to their lives. Practitioners visit children at a level that meets children's needs and quickly develop positive relationships with them. This helps workers to understand what children's lives are like.
10. Assessments undertaken are mostly thorough, giving consideration to family history, the views of children and families and the views of professionals involved. This results in a detailed analysis of risk. Genograms and family network meetings do not always include all relevant extended family members. This means that children may not benefit from support from everyone available in their family network.
11. Strong relationships with midwifery services ensure the early identification of need, support and intervention pre-birth. Planning demonstrates an understanding and expertise in pre-birth work, with specialist assessment commissioned early when required.
12. Work undertaken in the duty and assessment service is having a positive impact on children's experiences. Instability in the workforce in this part of the service, while not impacting on the quality of work with children, is placing pressures on staff who undertake additional work. Leaders have taken action to address this, but it is too soon to see the impact.
13. Practitioners provide good support to children at risk of neglect or domestic abuse. Staff understand the cumulative impact of neglect through extensive consideration of chronologies and using a range of effective tools, interventions and assessments.
14. Practitioners use child protection and child in need plans to help families to understand what needs to happen to improve their children's lives. Regular multi-agency reviews of these plans enable the effective measurement of the progress and impact of the plan.
15. When risks to children do not reduce, or they increase, children enter the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline in a timely way. Work undertaken during pre-proceedings results in either children becoming safer and being diverted from court proceedings or being appropriately stepped up to court proceedings to safeguard them.
16. Disabled children in need receive an effective and supportive service from practitioners who know children well. Consequently, children and their families' lives improve.

17. Children who are at risk of exploitation in Rutland benefit from effective multi-agency information-sharing and planning. Children who go missing are offered timely return home interviews which explore the reasons for going missing to inform future planning.
18. Effective use of multi-systemic therapy is helping several children and families safely stay together.
19. The small number of children living in private fostering arrangements are well supported and cared for.
20. Frontline management in the duty and assessment service and the protection and permanence team is consistently strong. Regular, good-quality supervision helps to ensure that the right decisions are made for children.
21. The local authority designated officer service is effective, ensuring that allegations against professionals are investigated and responded to in a timely way. This helps safeguard children.
22. The inclusive learning team seamlessly integrates strong and effective systems to monitor and support children who are missing from education and those who are electively home educated. Staff build supportive relationships with families, underpinned by clear expectations. Leaders ensure that they collect the information they need to ensure that vulnerable children are being safeguarded and that they receive the additional support they need. Leaders recognise education as a protective factor in the safety and well-being of vulnerable children.

## **The experiences and progress of children in care: good**

23. Children only come into care when it is appropriate and necessary for them to do so. When admissions to care are necessary, they occur in a planned way, for example either through escalation into court proceedings for very young children, or via the national transfer scheme for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Careful consideration is given to matching children with placements that meet their individual and unique needs.
24. Managers and leaders maintain robust oversight of all children in care to enable them to achieve permanence at the earliest opportunity. Parallel and triple track planning routinely occurs. When children cannot be safely cared for by their parents, social workers explore whether they can live with other family members or other adults known to them. As a result, some children secure timely permanence via kinship placements, child arrangement orders and special guardianship orders granted to carers they already know.
25. When children cannot remain within their wider family and friends network, some children secure permanence via long-term foster placements that meet

their needs well. Systems to formally celebrate achieving permanence in this way are not as clear as they could be, meaning that a few children live with uncertainty about their future living arrangements longer than they need to.

26. When it has been identified that adoption would be the best permanence option for a child, planning is timely and effective. A small number of children have benefited from living with their adopters from a very young age, giving them a sense of belonging.
27. Social workers visit children in care regularly and those children who have had consistent social workers develop strong and trusting relationships with them. Social workers are creative in their use of a range of mediums to help children express themselves, such as handprints, mood boards, games and walks. These positive relationships help children to feel valued and listened to. Some children have, however, experienced multiple changes in social worker because of staff absence and churn. Strong frontline management oversight of these children has mitigated the impact of this, but the changes have hindered some children's ability to form trusting relationships with social workers.
28. The local authority has accepted in a timely fashion its full allocation of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children under the National Transfer Scheme. From a low starting point, it has developed and is providing effective support for these children.
29. Practitioners understand the value of completing life-story work with children. Skilful practitioners have used life-story work to help many children to understand their family history and to process early trauma. This highly effective work has helped some children to develop emotionally and to take pride in who they are as unique individuals.
30. Most children have an up-to-date assessment of their needs. Their assessments detail and consider children's changing needs as they get older, and they inform the plans made for them. Children's plans consider how children will be helped on a day-to-day basis alongside longer-term permanence plans so that their needs can be considered and met.
31. Skilled social workers in the disabled children's service have a good understanding of the needs of disabled children in care. Regularly updated assessments and effective planning mean that disabled children in care have positive experiences and make good progress in all aspects of their lives.
32. Most children contribute to regularly held reviews of their care plans. Children have access to independent advocacy services. Independent reviewing officers monitor children's welfare in between reviews, but their use of escalation is limited and underdeveloped.

33. Practitioners understand the importance of children's enduring relationships. They support brothers and sisters to remain together. Where this is not possible, family time is promoted between children and those people who are important to them. Practitioners regularly review children's family time arrangements to ensure that they meet each child's needs.
34. Practitioners and carers support children to engage and participate in a range of social and leisure activities. Professionals and council members celebrate children's talents and achievements at an annual achievement ceremony. This helps children to feel proud of what they have achieved.
35. The excellent virtual school is dedicated to transforming the lives of children in care so that they experience positive and fulfilling life journeys. Most children in care attend school regularly and they make good educational progress from their starting points. Additional funds are used wisely to support children in care to accelerate their progress. School leaders describe the services provided by the virtual school as 'brilliant'. Children benefit greatly from innovative and positive engagement in education, art, photography, music, sports and residential visits, alongside a full range of academic subjects. The strong emphasis placed by the virtual school on growing the cultural capital of children in care means that children begin to develop positive aspirations for their futures. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children have access to computer technology and courses to begin to learn the English language.
36. Children are not consistently having their health needs assessed in a timely way when they enter care. Some of these children are very young or are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, for whom these assessments are particularly important to identify needs and appropriate support or treatment. The increasing use of strengths and difficulties questionnaires and access to emotional and mental health services help to ensure that children's emotional health needs are met.
37. While most children in care live outside of Rutland, they do live in stable placements that meet their needs. Placement choices within the county are limited. While this does not significantly impact the quality of day-to-day care, it means some children, including very young children, are having to spend too much time travelling to and from family time or, for school-age children, to and from school. Foster carers currently approved by the local authority are positive about fostering in Rutland. Leaders are fully aware of this sufficiency challenge and have plans to double the number of fostering households in Rutland by the end of the year.
38. Despite the sufficiency challenges, no children under 16 are living in unregistered children's homes. For the small number of children aged 16 and 17 who live in supported accommodation, this is appropriate, with providers who have applied to register with Ofsted. Leaders have oversight of these children to ensure that they have packages of support to meet their needs.

39. The small number of children who are members of Rutland's Children in Care Council (Speak Up, Speak Out) enjoy meeting together and they have participated in several enriching activities together. Members are proud of their involvement in recruitment and of their work in shaping positive language for professionals who work with children in care. Unfortunately, children's meetings are not held regularly enough. There is more for leaders to do to develop this group and evidence their impact on service development.

## **The experiences and progress of care leavers: good**

40. Social workers and personal advisers (PAs) support children in care well to transition into adulthood. They listen to children about any worries they have and devise plans to mitigate them.
41. Many care leavers benefit from enduring, trusting relationships with their PAs. PAs are persistent, they know their care leavers well, they are kind, and they act as strong advocates for them. PAs understand young people's unique characteristics and situations. PAs visit care leavers at a frequency that meets individual needs.
42. However, for a small but significant number of care leavers, their experiences have not been as positive due to changes in PA and periods of staff absences. A care leaver described feeling bewildered by the number of changes in worker they have experienced.
43. PAs and health professionals help care leavers to understand their health histories. Care leavers routinely receive their histories when they become 18. This means they have important information about their lives and where to access health advice in the future should they need this.
44. PAs support care leavers to maintain good physical and emotional health. PAs understand the lasting impact of early trauma on young people. They continue to complete life-story work with young people to help them understand their history, their complex family dynamics and their emotions. This has helped to build young people's confidence, ambition and ability to manage important relationships.
45. Pathway planning is effective. PAs routinely write these with care leavers. The plans are ambitious and cover what is important to the care leaver. PAs review pathway plans every six months with each care leaver, or sooner if their circumstances change. Care leavers find value in their pathway plans. Pathway plans hold professionals to account in terms of their responsibilities and actions to help and support care leavers to fulfil their aspirations and ambitions.
46. Care leavers benefit from a comprehensive local offer. PAs understand and promote the offer. This is helping care leavers to understand their rights and

entitlements. In times of crisis, the local authority does what any responsible parent would do to help care leavers emotionally and practically. Positively, care leavers were involved in the writing of the local offer, and being a care leaver has recently become a protected characteristic.

47. A good number of care leavers benefit from continuing to live in stable and nurturing homes with their former foster carers. This provides care leavers with a secure base from where they can develop emotionally and practically before taking their next step into adult life.
48. Care leavers continue to receive support for as long as they need it after turning 21. Help and support only ceases when care leavers no longer want or need support. As a result, care leavers know that they always have somewhere to go and someone to speak to whenever they need it.
49. PAs are effective advocates for care leavers who are pregnant or have children. When there are concerns about care leavers' children, PAs support the care leaver through statutory processes and to develop skills to become successful parents.
50. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people make up a considerable proportion of the care leaver population in Rutland. Most live in accommodation that meets their needs and in communities that they are familiar with. They benefit from a range of educational opportunities, and they are helped to access legal advice at the earliest opportunity about their settled status. This reduces anxiety and helps them to develop a sense of permanence.
51. A high proportion of care leavers are successfully engaged in education, employment or training. The local authority's transition coach provides an instrumental role in building strong relationships with care leavers, providing personalised support and advice to care leavers. Those who are not in education, employment or training are helped to gain employability skills, to prepare for job interviews, and to access college, apprenticeships and further and higher education.
52. Care leavers benefit from the input of creative mentors to help them develop their interests and aspirations. Through emotional and social support, care leavers are helped to develop their skills and confidence. Mentors are creatively matched to care leavers' needs and interests.
53. Most care leavers live in suitable accommodation, but not always in their choice of location. Due to Rutland's geography and demographics, the lack of available local housing options and access to public housing is a challenge. The local authority provides some individual packages of support; however, some care leavers experience difficulties negotiating complex out-of-authority housing processes. Leaders are fully aware of this sufficiency challenge and have plans under way to address this. It is too soon to see the impact.



## **The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: good**

54. A stable, permanent leadership team, with strong political and corporate support, has been successful in improving the quality and impact of social work practice with children. Leaders have created a culture whereby staff at every level operate in a reflective and open manner, and within a culture that keeps children's safety and well-being at the centre of their practice.
55. Leaders and managers are child-focused. They are committed to getting things right for children. This is exemplified by a strong and impactful early help service that is improving children's lives, by concerted efforts to support children to remain living within their birth family if it is safe to do so, by effective permanence planning, and by the impact of an excellent virtual school.
56. Strategic partnerships are mostly effective and are particularly strong with education partners. A designated safeguarding lead described the local authority as a 'listening authority', and another noted that there had been a marked improvement in front door services. Cafcass and the designated judge are also complimentary about the quality and impact of practice in Rutland.
57. Overall, the local authority works effectively with other agencies. The operation of early help services and a community partnership with Leicester City Football Club have resulted in positive outcomes for many children in terms of developing confidence, self-esteem and self-belief. These are examples of strategic partnerships enabling effective multi-agency operations. Leaders recognise that there is, however, more to do as a partnership to strengthen timely police engagement in multi-agency strategy meetings and the timeliness of initial and review health assessments for children in care in Rutland.
58. An embedded, relationship-based model of practice used by practitioners in Rutland is helping to ensure that children and families receive consistent support that makes a positive difference to children's lives. One practitioner explained that the model 'makes practitioners feel secure in themselves'.
59. Political and corporate leaders have shown ambition as corporate parents. This is evidenced by a comprehensive care leaver offer and by the recent unanimous council endorsement to make care leaver a protected characteristic. Leaders know there remains more to do to strengthen housing options, tackle sufficiency challenges for children in care and care leavers, and to strengthen child participation so that it has a greater impact on service development.
60. Senior leaders have a good understanding of the quality and impact of services in Rutland. The authority's recently updated self-evaluation accurately reflects the quality and impact of practice that has been seen during the inspection. This informs service priorities such as increasing the number of foster carers in

Rutland and the stabilisation of the workforce. While plans are now under way to address these areas for development, the impact is not yet fully evident.

61. As a result of an improved quality assurance framework and increased capacity in the quality assurance service since the previous inspection, leaders have a clear and effective oversight of frontline practice. Collaborative practice reviews with moderation, which practitioners report positively about, thematic audits, seeking feedback from children and families, and responding to complaints and compliments all contribute to the line of sight. Learning from quality assurance activities, via weekly practice sessions, seven-minute briefings and monthly newsletters, is well received by practitioners. Case audits are accurate, but do not always specify the actions required to improve the child's experiences. Managers and practitioners do not always discuss audit findings in subsequent supervision.
62. Frontline management of practice within early help and across children's services is a strength in Rutland. Managers have oversight of children's assessments, plans and reviews. Frequent case supervision provides practitioners with guidance regarding case progression and time to reflect on children's unique needs and circumstances. This helps promote more creative and innovative practice.
63. Rutland has some exceptionally skilled practitioners, who are kind and compassionate. These practitioners, who have manageable workloads, spend time with children and families, and they build positive relationships with them. This is having a positive outcome for many children and their families.
64. Despite the above, recruitment and retention have remained a challenge in Rutland. As a result, a few children, predominantly in the throughcare service, have experienced many changes in social worker and PA. This has hindered some children's ability to develop a trusting and consistent relationship with a social worker or PA. Leaders rightly recognise that without a stable workforce, the improvements that have been made in terms of practice and children's experiences since the previous inspection will be hard to maintain. Positively, in response to this, vacancies have been recruited to, and new permanent staff have very recently started or are due to start work in Rutland imminently.
65. Despite these challenges, most practitioners in Rutland are positive about the benefits of working in a small county. They feel very well supported by their managers, and they appreciate the learning and development opportunities afforded to them.

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