

Improving Lives Summary Report

1.	Date of meeting:	5th March 2019
2.	Title:	Improvement Partner Peer Review of the LAC Service (November 2018)
3.	Directorate:	Children & Young People's Services (CYPS)

1. Background

RMBC's Improvement Partner, Lincolnshire Children's Services, was invited to undertake a Peer Review of the Looked After Children (LAC) Service in November 2018. This was almost two years after the previous Peer Review in December 2016 and twelve months after the Ofsted Inspection in November 2017. The rationale for this further Review was to gauge the ongoing improvements within the Service given that the LAC Service was the only part of CYPS to be graded as Requires Improvement by Ofsted. Whilst the Inspection identified that, "The local authority has improved the services it provides for children looked after since the last inspection" it also concluded that many of the changes were too new and insufficiently embedded for any other conclusion to be reached.

The remit of the Review was to undertake an assessment of:-

- Quality of Care Plan and Pathway Plans
- IROs – challenge and monitoring of quality
- Fostering Recruitment – Review of the process at the front end e.g. marketing, expressions of interest etc
- Admissions to Care – review of cases
- Right Child Right Care Programme (RCRC) – review to ensure performance and Voice of the Child
- Interface/Transition between LAC and Leaving Care/Adults

The following Focus Groups were arranged to meet with the Peer Review Team (PRT) :-

- Fostering Marketing and Recruitment Officer.
- Fostering Assessing Social Workers.
- IROs.
- LAC Sws involved in the RCRC Programme.
- Foster Carers (including those in the Mockingbird programme).
- LAC Council
- LAC/Leaving Care Managers.
- Leaving Care Staff.

In addition to this the Review team undertook case file audits in respect of 4 children becoming looked after (BLA), 4 children in the Right Child Right Placement project, 3 children on the Permanence Tracker, 10 looked after young people aged 16+ and 10 other randomly selected LAC files.

As a result of the range and depth of the review work undertaken there can be significant confidence that the findings made were accurate and reflective of the quality of social work interventions provided to Rotherham's looked after children.

2. What's Working Well?

Over all the PRT concluded that Rotherham's Children's Services had successfully demonstrated a strong commitment to improving outcomes for children and that there had been clear improvement within the LAC Service since Lincolnshire's visit in 2017. Arguably the most re-assuring conclusion was that there had been a strong cultural shift across the organisation, which was clearly evident to the team when meeting all staff. Workforce stability was good, and the workforce was motivated and keen to provide a good service to Looked After Children in Rotherham. All social workers reported access to frequent verbal case discussions with their managers, including senior leaders. Senior leaders were visible and accessible and social workers felt able to raise concerns/suggestions and felt listened to. These improvements were facilitated by the fact that there had been a continued reduction in agency staff and with some agency staff becoming permanent employees. This meant that children were receiving a more consistent social work intervention and as a result all staff knew their children well and had high aspirations and hopes for their futures. The other significant factor was identified as being co-location being universally seen as a major success as the LAC teams felt more integrated into the wider CYPS with inter-agency communication being much improved.

Specifically in respect of the LAC social work teams they identified good practice as being the fact that LAC and Leaving Care Teams met regularly to improve integrated working and that joint supervisions occur between teams at transfer. Social workers expressed some positive views regarding the Public Law Outline Panel as they could see an increasing challenge regarding thresholds and better use of pre-proceedings processes to divert families away from proceedings or from children becoming LAC. Within the case file audits they identified that the majority of case records viewed were up to date and that children were seen and statutory visits in most cases were within the expected timescale. More significantly they identified that missing episodes for all looked after children had reduced by 60% over the course of the previous year and that the Leaving Care Team were appropriately identifying risk, undertaking intense direct work and regularly went 'the extra mile' to ensure the safety of care leavers.

One significant shift from the previous visits was that the PRT felt that social workers knew their children well and were able to express real aspirations for them in respect of successful outcomes. They did, however, encourage an increased use of direct work (words and pictures etc.) with children and that this was more clearly evident on the case records so as to improve the quality of care planning. Although the managers and the foster carers felt that the Intensive Intervention Programme was a good resource, they also reported that the significant waiting list jeopardised the impact of this therapeutic support on placement stability.

In respect of the IROs, the PRT felt that the revised Dispute Resolution Process was making a difference and was increasingly focussed on outcomes for children rather than processes and outputs (administrative functions). As a result it was clear that the IRO's were striving to evidence their footprint and impact on the child's plan.

In respect of Fostering Recruitment the staff were again felt to be enthusiastic and motivated to provide a good service and were supported by a stable management group. The specialist team that works with Reg 24 (kinship) carers, private fostering, short breaks and Mockingbird was identified to be an asset. As a result of the input of this team, most of the Reg 24 placements progressed to permanence in the form of Special Guardianship Orders and where they did not the service was confident that this was the right plan for the child. The PRT found no evidence to undermine this confidence in respect of the appropriateness of this permanence planning.

There is a dedicated marketing worker based within the Fostering Team who works jointly with the Communications and Marketing Team and a dedicated recruitment team that

provided regular drop-in sessions which were also actively facilitated by existing foster carers. There was also a dedicated fostering advisor offering consistency to all new applicants and the fact that there was a positive working relationship between the fostering advisor and the assessing social workers supported the development of the initial visit process, including a joint visit with the assessing social workers, ensuring that they were sufficiently robust.

As a result the foundations with regards to marketing were felt to be strong with a clear communication and marketing campaign plan set out for the year. The Challenge 63, Muslim Foster Carer Project and Star Parties (Start Thinking About Recruitment) appeared to be having some impact had already resulted in formal applications being received. They commented positively on the fact that the Skills to Foster course was bi-monthly and within this there was flexibility with facilitating the course to avoid drift and delay in assessments. The introduction of the recruitment process 'pipeline' was proving effective with clear monitoring and tracking established in respect of all enquiries including long term enquiries which supported more enquiries through to assessment.

The introduction of Mockingbird had commenced and was in the process of setting up the 2nd hub with a 3rd identified for early 2019. This scheme had been welcomed by foster carers who could see that it was going to be a valuable source of support and that the multi-agency training that came with the project was a real positive and should be extended to all foster carers. Even outside of the Mockingbird project the PRT identified a clear sense of a developed fostering community within the foster carer network. The foster carers themselves felt that the support that they received from their Supervising Social Worker when in work was excellent although they also commented that there have been significant periods of instability within the service. Both the managers and foster carers were also positive about the development of a targeted retention policy in order to support the required increase of in-house foster care placements.

In conclusion the PRT stated that CYPS had a real opportunity with a clear practice framework in respect of Signs of Safety and Restorative Practice, to place relationships at the heart of all social work interventions. However, in order to ensure that this is embedded within CYPS and across partner agencies, they felt it needed to become a shared language and be driven by senior leaders across the organisation.

3. What are we Worried About?

Within the legal process the PRT felt that there was not always adherence to the PLO and Care Planning processes where permanence other than adoption was the plan. In addition all of the social work teams within CYPS were not effectively using the pre-proceedings process for unborn babies which may have been due to the fact that there was no consistently used pre-birth assessment template. As a result the PRT identified some cases where planning and decision making about achieving permanence suggested drift and a lack of clarity. Linked to this the PRT concluded that identifying extended family members as potential carers was not as rigorous as they would expect to see and some concerns were expressed regarding the robustness of some viability assessments. They recommended that team managers needed to encourage staff to develop a more systematic approach to exploring networks and family members, both as potential carers but also as key support in safety planning. This issue was further complicated by some misunderstanding and lack of knowledge regarding Reg 24/SGO's placements being expressed by some social workers.

However, the PRT recognised that Rotherham has undertaken a 'Deep Dive' of the current and recent LAC cohort to ensure children are transitioning to LAC status within appropriate thresholds, to secure permanence via a number of routes and to develop exit plans. This audit led to the establishing of the Right Child Right Care project which was yielding results in respect of increasing the numbers of children discharged from care and reducing the

average length of time children spent in care. Despite this in some cases where permanence or revocations of orders had been agreed, there was still some drift and delay. Staff cited these delays as being caused by insufficient Panel availability, court time-tabling and capacity due to court work demands. In addition they cited the demands on their capacity caused by the need to supervise several hours of contact every week and the further pressure caused by driving to Out of Authority placements as barriers to this work being completed in a more timely manner. LAC social workers also questioned some of the thresholds being employed within the duty teams and they were able to identify cases where they had been able to return child home within a relatively short space of time after becoming looked after.

The social workers consulted stated that they believed that a review of transfer points of case allocations between different service areas would be beneficial. The consensus was that there were too many transfer points leading to unnecessary changes in social workers which is not in line with Rotherham's relationship based practice framework and restorative practice.

In respect of Care Planning the quality of Care Plans/Pathway Plans reviewed was felt to be too inconsistent. However, one plan that was sampled was deemed to be of 'Outstanding' quality which could be used as a best practice example. 1170191. The main issue with some of the other Care/Pathway Plans was an identified lack of analysis, a lack consistent representation of the child's voice, actions not being sufficiently SMART and insufficient concept as to how progress would be measured.

In respect of the IRO footprint the PRT concluded that the IRO Compliance Form focussed too much on paperwork and processes rather than outcomes. As a result the social workers had spoken negatively of report and questioned IRO's ability and confidence to navigate the case record system to locate the information they were seeking. This finding echoed the general belief that, within CYPS, attention to compliance has been robust but the general consensus was that there needed to a shift of focus to outcomes, whilst not diluting the levels of compliance already achieved. The PRT therefore felt that this form could be developed to be more restorative and include impact and outcomes for the child.

The PRT recognised that with the growth in LAC numbers in Rotherham, it was vital for the financial sustainability of the LAC Service, that investment in the fostering service ensured sufficient in house placements. As a result the marketing campaign would benefit from being strengthened in terms of a focussed and targeted campaign. In addition to the yearly campaign a long term strategy linked to Rotherham's sufficiency strategy, would provide focus and clear direction moving forward. This Strategy would need to strengthen the analysis of soft intelligence and data, to inform a targeted recruitment strategy that was linked to an 'umbrella slogan' to gain brand recognition. The PRT did, however, recognise that there is a Retention Project being undertaken with the Fostering Network, and that the offer to foster carers needed to be more explicit and used as part of the marketing campaign.

Foster carers reported to the PRT that they felt that they were not seen as professionals or valued by social workers and commented that they would like the opportunity for their voice to be heard. One comment "please treat me like a professional and be open and honest". As a result whilst foster carers understood the necessity to recruit new carers, they did not feel they are part of the journey or as involved as they could be. As part of a longer term strategy annual surveys and focus groups with existing foster carers would support and inform retention.

4. What are we going to do about it?

- Over the course of 2019 there will be an acceleration of the individual projects already in process (including the Muslim Foster Carer Project, Mockingbird, STAR parties and Challenge 63) that, together, will contribute to better foster carer recruitment.
- The Foster Carer Retention Policy will be presented to DLT in March 2019. This will include the first Review of Foster Carer Allowances undertaken since 2016.
- The revised Foster Carer Marketing Strategy will be produced and implemented as from April 2019.
- The Commissioning and Placements Service will revise the LAC Placements Sufficiency Strategy by the end of March 2019.
- The Public Law Outline Panel can already evidence significantly more robust challenge in respect of the identification and assessment of extended family members as carers for children becoming looked after or as an alternative to them becoming looked after.
- The Agency Decision Maker has taken responsibility for ensuring that viability Reg 24 assessments are significantly more robust. This has included recommendations made by the Internal Audit undertaken of the processes involved and specific training/awareness raising and the sharing of a Process Flowchart to all social work teams to address any confusion regarding expectations and responsibilities in respect of these placements and Special Guardianship placements.
- Right Child Right Care (RCRC) phase 2 has commenced with 157 children in the original scoping for a discharge from care to permanence over the course of 2019.
- The monthly RCRC performance clinic now also agendas those children with no viable plan for discharge to ensure where appropriate that there is an alternative permanence plan in place. This includes children who have been in the same placement for 18 months or more to be presented to a specific Foster Panel to consider a long-term match.
- The Court and Permanence Teams are developing a revised Pre-birth assessment tool based on the Signs of Safety model.
- The Social Care Pathway Review is underway with the aim of reducing handover points. The plan will be produced by 1st March 2019 with implementation being completed by the end of 2019.
- The Contact Service (Family Activity Base) is undergoing a full review to maximise efficiency and reduce the contacts undertaken by social workers. This Review will be presented to DLT in March and should free up some social work capacity in order to enable them to undertake more direct work with their young people.
- Revised Life-story Work template to be launched within the social work teams in March 2019.
- The IRO Team are increasingly using Signs of Safety scaling in the Statutory Review process and are currently reviewing the Compliance Form to ensure escalations are more outcome focussed with a target set up date of April 2019.
- The Rotherham Therapeutic Team will present a report to DLT outlining the impact of the Intensive Intervention Programme with a view to making the case for this to be extended beyond the current funding which expires in March 2020.

5. Name and contact details

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(LAC and Care Leavers)