

Inspection of Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 27 June to 1 July 2022

Lead inspector: Neil Penswick, Her Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
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 and care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

The majority of children receive a good and timely service from Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council. Well-developed approaches to building resilience in families and supporting children in their communities appropriately ensure that only those with the highest needs are supported by statutory children's services. Children are safeguarded well, including by the multi-agency Evolve service, which addresses child exploitation concerns. Children in care and care leavers services ensure good progress for those children for whom the council has specific responsibilities. Excellent direct work with children and the consideration of their views ensure that children are at the centre of decision-making, resulting in services that best meet their needs.

Since the last Ofsted inspection, in 2017, there have been two focused visits, in 2019 and 2020. During these focused visits, inspectors saw evidence of good progress against identified actions, and saw that services continued to be delivered effectively during the COVID-19 pandemic. A new director of children's services and a strengthening of experience in the senior management team have continued the improvements. On this inspection, children in care services were seen to have further improved. Much good social work is evident in Rotherham. However, there is more to do to ensure that this is consistently delivered for all.

What needs to improve?

- Consideration of previous history and current circumstances when responding to 'front door' contacts and child protection concerns.
- Assessment of the identity needs of children when planning for their future.
- The level of ambition for individual care leavers, the support for them to achieve their aspirations and the detailing of this in pathway plans.
- The quality of individual case audits to inform wider service learning.

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

1. The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection are good because the majority of children are provided with the right support in a timely way, which improves their lives and outcomes.
2. Most children in need of help and protection are identified quickly at the front door. Recent remodelling of services following a peer review has led to an increased number of phone calls from other agencies and improved discussions about what would best meet children's needs. However, during the initial screening for non-urgent situations, staff at the front door are not always fully considering previous involvement with children's social care. This resulted in a small number of children not being provided with the appropriate level of intervention at the earliest opportunity. However, no children were seen to be at risk from this.
3. In the main, partner agencies gain consent from families when contacting the front door. However, some of the written referrals, in particular those received from South Yorkshire Police, are not always clear regarding whether the families have been made aware that children's social care would be informed and potentially would be in touch with them to offer support. In order to check this out, social workers have needed to go back to the referrer, which at times delays the screening of children's needs. Social workers appropriately dispense with consent when necessary to safeguard children.
4. Strategy meetings are very well attended by relevant partner agencies. However, in a very small number of cases, a lack of police availability has led to delays in these being convened. While children are visited beforehand by social workers to ensure that the children are not at immediate risk of harm and to ensure that safety plans are in place prior to the strategy meetings, there is a lack of appropriate coordination, resulting in some children and families needing to repeat their concerns for other agencies. Rotherham senior managers have addressed this matter with the police, and new processes have been introduced to prevent this occurring again.

5. Daily triage of concerns regarding domestic abuse takes place within a multi-agency domestic abuse meeting. Immediate safety planning is considered, with a clear analysis of risk. Management rationale for next steps is clearly recorded.
6. Children are stepped up and down to the Early Help service appropriately, with managers capturing their oversight and decision-making in case records. Where required, Early Help workers co-work with social workers to provide targeted interventions to support families and children in their homes.
7. The quality of child protection enquiries is generally comprehensive in considering the current situation for the child and the impact of the child's previous history and concerns. However, for a very small number of children, the investigation focused on the current concern without fully taking into consideration historic and contextual concerns.
8. Social workers complete proportionate assessments in a timely manner. They collate information from partner agencies in order to support completion of comprehensive assessments that reflect the experiences of children and families. Assessments show a clear understanding of the impact of family on current circumstances for children. Risks are appropriately identified during assessments, leading to coherent plans that promote children's welfare.
9. When children are identified to be at risk of significant harm, decisions to convene an initial child protection conference are appropriate. Attendance and involvement by partners are consistently good and their knowledge of children and their views is well captured and informs initial and review conference outcomes.
10. Children in need and those subject to child protection planning are visited regularly. Visits are purposeful and social workers have meaningful discussions with children to understand their wishes and feelings. For younger children and disabled children, observations are well used to understand their relationships with parents and other family members. Family networks are used to enhance the support for children. Excellent detailed and thoughtful direct work supports children to build trusting relationships with their social workers. Social workers know their children well and develop effective relationships with parents, enabling them to understand concerns and what needs to change.
11. The attendance of partners at children in need and core group meetings is good and children benefit from comprehensive multi-agency packages of intervention. Social workers have a strong relational approach to interaction, which supports parents and children to engage well in meetings. Plans result in interventions that make a positive difference to children and improve their lives. When risks do not reduce in a timely way for children, the decision is made promptly to step up, including into pre-proceedings.
12. Children benefit from the effective application of the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline (PLO). As a result, assessments and intensive pieces of

work are undertaken to ensure that there is no delay in securing safe, permanent care for children. Social workers prepare thoroughly for legal gateway meetings and pre-proceedings panels, which enables timely legal advice and decision-making. Before proceedings, parents receive letters which detail the issues, what has improved and the support that is being provided from children's services. The actions the parents are required to complete are detailed in a separate safety plan so that parents are clear about what is expected of them.

13. Strategic tracking by a highly experienced PLO officer provides clear oversight of the progress of pre-proceedings work. There are regular meetings, and managerial overview positively influences outcomes for children. Children are appropriately stepped out of pre-proceedings when targeted multi-agency work results in risks being reduced. Effective pre-proceedings work means that, when children cannot safely remain in their family's care, they become looked after at the right time for them.
14. The Evolve team works proactively with children to reduce risks associated with sexual and criminal exploitation. The co-location of partner agencies means there is effective sharing of information. Exploitation assessments and plans are live documents that are drawn together with the child, their family and the multi-agency network. These are comprehensive and child-focused and ensure that the right safety plan is in place for children.
15. Evolve workers use a range of tools and strategies to explore children's understanding of issues such as consent, internet safety and the effect of substances in relation to exploitation. Relationship-based practice supports children to make progress in understanding exploitation, and risks subsequently reduce for children. Where children are not ready to openly share information, the Evolve workers are relentless in continuing to make themselves available and in using all the intelligence at their disposal to understand the child's experiences. Regular multi-agency meetings take place in order for professionals to review intelligence and risk effectively. The impact of these processes is helping professionals to be informed, to map activity and networks, and to undertake disruption work. Management oversight is analytical and clear.
16. Dedicated advocates ensure that return home interviews are completed in a timely manner. Information gained from return home interviews is used effectively in order to manage risk and inform children's plans.
17. The local authority designated officer (LADO) service in Rotherham responds promptly and robustly to concerns about adults in a position of trust who present risks to children. There is thorough coordination of the ongoing investigation of concerns, and all cases then have a senior management overview. The LADOs also carry out training for other professionals to make them aware of how concerns are addressed and responded to.

18. Children aged 16 to 17 who present as homeless are well supported. In the main, they benefit from a joint assessment between social care and housing to determine the next steps for the child. The lack of availability of placements can cause delay when children choose to come into care, and they continue to live in temporary and sometimes unsuitable places. If children choose not to come into care when they are homeless, they remain subject to child-in-need plans, and support is offered to promote their welfare.
19. Private fostering arrangements are promptly recognised. Assessments of private fostering arrangements are mainly thorough. However, in a small number of cases, police and/or Disclosure and Barring Service checks had not been promptly requested, which potentially left children vulnerable. Children are visited regularly to ensure that their specific needs continue to be met.
20. If children are not receiving suitable full-time education, leaders work successfully with schools and families to improve the situation. Leaders are relentless in their approach to making sure that children have a school place and are attending.
21. Leaders use a variety of agencies and information to find children who are missing from education and quickly allocate them a school place. If pupils are not taking up this place, leaders put in extra challenge and support to ensure that they do quickly.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: good

22. When children come into care in Rotherham, decisions are timely and responsive to concerns about escalating risks. Social workers complete comprehensive assessments that enable most children to be placed with carers who meet their needs. However, due to a lack of sufficient homes, some children experience instability before they are settled.
23. When children cannot remain in their parents' care, they live within their extended family whenever possible. Appropriate assessments are undertaken to support this, and children's permanence is secured through special guardianship and child arrangement orders, where these meet the child's needs.
24. When it is not possible for children to live with their extended family, early permanence planning is promptly considered. Social workers routinely consider parallel planning for children, including foster to adopt, alongside consideration of the extended birth family. Family network meetings and family group conferences are effective in identifying alternative carers and conducting timely viability assessments to prevent drift and delay in proceedings. Rotherham staff work effectively with both the courts and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service.

25. Social workers recognise the importance of brothers and sisters living together where possible and work hard to support these crucial enduring relationships. Children are helped to stay in touch with those who are important to them through creatively planned family time. Children's views are listened to, and arrangements are made for family time that meets their needs. Carers actively encourage and support family time.
26. Children's care plans are mostly comprehensive. However, children's identities are not always thoroughly considered in care planning, meaning their cultural needs may not be fully understood or responded to. Care plans are regularly reviewed by independent reviewing officers (IROs). Some children attend their review meetings, with others sharing their views through meeting the IRO beforehand or through their social worker or carer. When this occurs, it supports child-centred planning, which improves outcomes for children. Children in care reviews are well attended by professionals, which results in agreed actions to support outcomes to improve.
27. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are appropriately safeguarded by becoming looked after. Children aged 16 or over are usually placed in supported accommodation. Their cultural needs and the impact of any trauma they may have suffered are not always considered in depth, which risks their needs not being addressed.
28. Disabled children who need to come into care do so at the right time. Social workers are skilled in using creative direct work to seek the views of disabled children, which informs future care planning.
29. Children aged 16 to 17 living in unregulated accommodation are in appropriate homes that meet their needs. For one child, who is under 16 years old, a lack of placement sufficiency means that they are living in unregistered children's provision, and therefore an unlawful provision. Considerable efforts have been made to find them a suitable placement, and there is a heightened frequency of visits and management oversight in recognition of the risks to the child.
30. Children are visited at frequencies suited to their needs. Social workers have strong and mostly long-standing, trusting relationships with children, which gives them a clear insight into children's views and needs.
31. Social workers are creative when working with children in care, and there are many strong examples of ongoing life-story work to help children to understand their experiences.
32. The Children in Care Council (CiCC) is a well-coordinated group that meets regularly. This influential group supports children in care to have a voice. There is a sense of responsibility about what they do. Rotherham council members and senior leaders take the group seriously, for example their ongoing commitment in the campaign to explore a leisure pass for children in care and care leavers.

33. The health needs of children in care and care leavers are well addressed in planning. For example, emotional well-being is considered in order to support children to understand their history, with some children receiving therapeutic support from the in-house Rotherham therapeutic team, while others have child and adolescent mental health services individually commissioned to meet their needs.
34. The attendance of children in care in school has improved since the last inspection. A sharp focus on literacy in personal education plans is supporting more children in care to achieve well in primary school. Older children in care receive effective careers guidance. Many pupils go on to further education post-16, with clear pathways for employment.
35. Most children live in stable homes that meet their needs due to being matched with the right foster carers, with whom they develop positive relationships. However, gaps in documentation make it difficult to understand how key decisions are made around where some children live, which will not assist them in the future if they wish to review their records in order to understand their history in care.
36. Children are well matched to their carers, supporting security and long-term stability. However, some children have experienced many moves between homes before securing permanence.
37. There are insufficient numbers of in-house foster carers to meet demand. There is an ambitious recruitment strategy, with some innovative initiatives to target under-represented groups.
38. Support for foster carers is strong. Carers receive regular supervision and have good working relationships with supervising social workers, and this helps them to provide good-quality care to children. The fostering panel provides a rigorous quality-assurance function.
39. Adopters report that the quality of support they have received is high. Assessments are comprehensive. They are sufficiently analytical and evaluate any strengths and vulnerabilities of the application. Preparation and training for adopters are effective, assisting adopters to understand the lived experiences of children placed with them. The regional adoption agency (One Adoption South Yorkshire) is effective in the recruitment of prospective adopters for Rotherham. There continues to be a focus on attracting a more diverse pool of prospective adopters, which is supported by targeted recruitment.
40. When children in care and care leavers face risks from exploitation or other potentially risky situations, their social workers and personal advisers (PAs) are persistent in offering advice, guidance and support to help them be safe. The Evolve service continues to provide direct support to young people and consultancy to the staff.

41. Children in care are supported to develop independence skills as they approach adulthood. They are offered options for accommodation, with a significant number choosing to stay with their foster carers. Children who access the House Project receive impressive support as they approach the age to leave care and beyond. Some care leavers who cannot access this project report that they believe that they receive a lower level of support than those at the House Project.
42. The vast majority of care leavers live in suitable accommodation. They are supported to secure and maintain their tenancies and they are usually happy and settled where they live. When care leavers do not have suitable accommodation, they are encouraged to accept support from their PAs and the housing service to secure this.
43. Care leavers are well informed about their rights and entitlements. They are very positive about their relationships with their PAs and the support they receive from them. PAs maintain regular contact with care leavers through a variety of methods and increase their contact and support when needed.
44. Care leavers have pathway plans that are regularly updated. Young people are actively encouraged to participate in their plans, and their wishes and feelings are clearly recorded. PAs routinely consider in care leavers' pathway plans whether the young person is in education, employment or training, and many care leavers are. However, pathway plans often reveal a lack of ambition and detail to support care leavers in achieving their specific aspirations. Some care leavers reported that their current employment did not meet their aspirations.

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

45. Children's services are a clear priority for Rotherham Council, from the leaders of the council to the cabinet and across the different political parties., This has led to a whole-council commitment to children and families in Rotherham. There has been increased financial investment in order for services for children to continue to improve. There is a real focus on raising the aspirations of children across Rotherham. This can be seen in children being engaged in the development of the council plan through specific activity days.
46. The chief executive is well informed about social work practice and holds partners to account. She chairs the corporate safeguarding group, which brings together representatives from every directorate and focuses on ensuring that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility across the council.
47. Rotherham Council is an active and committed corporate parent. There is good councillor representation at the Corporate Parenting Board. The CiCC is also involved and ensures that children's voices are clearly heard and responded to. As a result, corporate parents focus on areas that are important to children in

care, including how to celebrate achievements and providing a range of accommodation to achieve stability and permanence.

48. A learning culture is set from the top. The council leader, cabinet member and chief executive rigorously scrutinise and challenge the performance data and quality-assurance findings for children. They also recently undertook a joint performance review into fostering services with the children's services management team which led to recommendations on how barriers to recruitment could be addressed.
49. The director of children's services has been in post for 20 months. She is an inspirational leader with an excellent knowledge of the service. She has a relentless commitment to further develop children's services and build on the strengths that had been identified in the previous Ofsted inspections and focused visits. A self-evaluation produced for this inspection describes well the strengths of the service, although areas for further development were less clear.
50. The senior leadership team and managers have successfully delivered on all the actions identified from the Ofsted inspection of 2017 and focused visits of 2019 and 2020. A transformation programme to further improve services, together with individualised service plans, provides a collective focus to this improvement journey. As a result, services have been maintained or have continued to improve over the past five years. This is an impressive achievement during the global pandemic.
51. Managers are passionate about improving children's lives in Rotherham. They speak about the strong support they receive from senior managers and the excellent understanding and support from councillors and council leaders in order to ensure that children are protected and their welfare promoted. Recent new appointments of highly experienced managers from outside Rotherham are aimed at continuing the development of the management of the services.
52. Senior managers from key partner organisations report that children's services have continued to improve both strategically and operationally. They describe mature partnerships that allow healthy challenge across the organisations in order to ensure consistent high-quality services. They state that, due to the legacy issues, there is a real focus within the council on ensuring that things are done properly.
53. Sufficiency of placements continues to be a challenge. Positively, since the last inspection, Rotherham Council has increased the number and range of placements by opening three new children's homes, with a fourth soon to be opened. It has also increased the number of local foster carers. Addressing the lack of sufficient local placements remains the highest priority for the children's services.

54. In the main, the local authority manages to continue to recruit and retain highly experienced social workers. Regular supervision and management support ensure that there is a clear and consistent approach to supporting families and responding to risk. Newly qualified workers report positively on the support they receive and opportunities for further development, supported by advanced practitioners and the principal social worker. Caseloads allow workers to engage in well-focused direct work with the children.
55. The vast majority of social work practice supporting children in need, child protection and children in care seen on this inspection is of a good quality. All the children that inspectors met reported on the high-quality support they receive from their workers. Actively listening and responding to what children say are key components in the local authority's success in helping vulnerable children to be safer and have better lives.
56. Good use of data helps keep track of performance and, where issues are identified, the improvements are shared across the workforce. There are regular all-service learning sessions to share good practice, discuss issues and find solutions. There is a comprehensive programme of quality assurance. However, there is too much inconsistency in how the audits are conducted and then reported, which limits the benefits of this work. Reports from the audits focus too much on appreciation of the work undertaken rather than an evaluation of the impact on children's lives and on an identification of the further actions needed to secure best outcomes for children.
57. Management oversight is evident throughout children's services. This supports staff and ensures that there is a focus on the delivery of good services. IROs and child protection conference chairs also challenge workers, managers and other agencies where they feel that the work can be improved, including, in rare cases, through formal escalation processes. However, this combined oversight had not identified and challenged some of the areas for improvement on this inspection.
58. Social work supervision is held regularly. The sessions are reflective and have a focus on what needs to happen for children. Supervision contains clear management direction for social workers, including actions and timescales. Contingency planning is explored in most supervision sessions. The discussions do not take place in isolation. Instead, they reflect on previous identified action, progress and the impact for the child.
59. Staff and managers speak highly of the training offer available to them through the Rotherham Learning Academy.
60. Workers report how much they enjoy working for Rotherham, and that they feel professionally challenged and highly supported.



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