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26 July 2021

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Dear Gail

### **Focused visit to Rochdale children's services**

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic.

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Rochdale children's services on 15 and 16 June 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Kathryn Grindrod and Paula Thomson-Jones.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for providing help and protection for children in need and those subject to a child protection plan. Specifically, inspectors considered the application of thresholds, step-up/step-down arrangements and children subject to pre-proceedings support.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. However, the delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. The lead inspector and the director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19. Inspectors were primarily on site.

### **Headline findings**

An inspection of Rochdale children's services took place in February 2018, when the experiences and progress of children who need help and protection were found to require improvement to be good. Since that time, the quality of work with children in need of protection has improved in some areas. This includes the overall quality of assessments, leading to a good understanding of children's needs. These positive developments have been underpinned by the development of a comprehensive

quality assurance framework alongside regular auditing. However, full implementation of this framework and the pace of some planned improvements have been slowed by COVID-19 and changes to the management team at a head of service level.

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

- The focus of child protection planning on progress and impact.
- Understanding of and response to domestic abuse.
- Management oversight of the quality and timeliness of pre-proceedings work for children and families.
- The quality of auditing practice and its impact on improving practice.

### **Findings**

Rochdale has experienced high levels of COVID-19 throughout the pandemic. Despite this, the level of support offered to children and families has kept pace with increasing demand for services. Face-to-face visits to children, when necessary to ensure their protection and well-being, have continued. Some support services have been delivered online during the pandemic, making them more accessible but at times less impactful.

There has been an improvement in the overall quality of assessments since the last inspection. The majority are completed in timescales that reflect the needs of children, although they are not always updated when children's circumstances change. Relevant professionals contribute to assessments, providing a comprehensive understanding of risk and children's needs.

Children's wishes and feelings are well considered in the majority of assessments. However, some assessments do not give effective consideration of children's histories and the effectiveness of support previously received. This means that some children, particularly those experiencing neglect, continue to experience risk and harm as previously unsuccessful actions are repeated.

An increasing number of children in Rochdale experience emotional harm as a result of the impact of domestic abuse. Children and adults experiencing domestic abuse have access to specialist services. However, the nature of abuse, the behaviour of those who abuse, and the experiences of the victims of domestic abuse are not always comprehensively assessed and understood. This means that some children repeatedly experience harmful situations because the plans to protect them are overly optimistic.

Initial child protection conferences are well attended by partner agencies. They make appropriate decisions about whether children need to be subject to child protection plans. Child protection review meetings and core group meetings take

place regularly and partner agencies are usually well represented. Extra effort has been made to ensure that parents can physically attend and participate in these meetings safely during the pandemic. The views of children are considered in these meetings.

Children who are subject to child protection plans are seen and spoken to regularly by social workers who know them well. Face-to-face visits to children have continued throughout the pandemic, with appropriate safety measures in place. Children are given many opportunities to express their wishes and feelings, although direct work sometimes lacks purpose. This makes it more difficult to measure progress in children's lives.

Children have access to a variety of services to meet their specific needs, such as bereavement counselling and mental health support. The planning of this work does not always identify the difference it should make for children. This means that it is difficult to measure the impact that support is having for children and the revision of actions is sometimes too slow.

Some children experience repeated cycles of neglect and domestic abuse because child protection plans are not sufficiently clear about the desired outcomes for children. They often measure parental engagement rather than improvements in children's experiences. This leads to decisions being made to end some protection plans too soon before sustainable change has been achieved. Leaders were aware of this issue and planned to introduce changes to child protection processes, accompanied by training for child protection conference chairs and across the wider partnership. This was delayed while new heads of service were appointed and while partner agencies prioritised their response to COVID-19.

When circumstances do not improve for children, their cases are escalated to the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline. Children's cases held at this stage are appropriate. Planning and support for children and families at this level successfully leads to risks reducing for some children and appropriate decisions being made to step away from issuing care proceedings.

Strategic oversight of pre-proceedings work is not sufficiently robust or effective to provide senior leaders with intelligence about the impact of this work. The planning to extend pre-proceedings beyond 16 weeks is sometimes not purposeful, and decisions to initiate care proceedings are not always made in a timely way, particularly for those children experiencing long-term neglect. As a result of this visit, senior managers will now chair review meetings to improve their oversight of the progress of cases.

Social workers describe frequent and helpful case supervision with their managers, although records do not always reflect this. Management oversight can be seen in records across the range of social work activity with children. However, this does not always provide the challenge needed to improve the quality of practice for children. Newly appointed heads of service and frontline managers are being supported to

sharpen their oversight and scrutiny of social work practice. It is too soon for the impact of this to be fully seen.

Social workers in the child protection and court teams have manageable caseloads. Recent increases in demand for children's social care services and a rise in social worker vacancies created by promotion and innovation projects have been well managed. The creation of 10 new social work posts in the first response teams is keeping caseloads at a manageable level and supporting timely intervention.

Social workers enjoy working in Rochdale. Stable and supportive child protection and care planning teams, along with approachable and highly visible leaders, have helped social workers to continue their work with children and families throughout the pandemic. Newly recruited social workers receive thorough inductions and support despite the limitations created by the pandemic. Recently qualified social workers have protected caseloads and appropriate support as the complexity of their work increases. The child-focused leadership team has ensured that COVID-19 has not adversely impacted on staff and their work with children.

A comprehensive quality assurance framework which includes frequent audit activity is not providing a consistently clear picture about the effectiveness of social work practice. The desire to develop practice through collaborative auditing, involving children, their families and social workers sometimes falls short because some audits measure compliance with processes, rather than progress for children. Moderation of audits does not challenge the focus on compliance and as a result, the impact that social work practice is having for children.

Senior leaders had recognised the need to refocus auditing activity earlier in the year. They revised the audit tool to support evaluation of children's experiences and provided training for moderators. It is too soon to see whether this refocus will successfully impact on the quality of work with children.

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

Yours sincerely

Kathryn Grindrod  
Her Majesty's Inspector