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Suzanne Joyner  
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Dear Ms Joyner

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

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Rotherham children's services between 20 and 22 October 2020. The inspectors were Matt Reed, Louise Hollick, Mandy Nightingale, Kathryn Grindrod and Michele Costello, all of whom are Her Majesty's Inspectors.

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.

The methodology for this visit was 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. This visit was carried out by remote means, using video calls for discussions with local authority social workers, managers and leaders. 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 and meeting the needs of the local authority's workforce.

The visit looked at the quality and impact of key decision-making across help and protection, children in care and services for care leavers, together with the impact of leadership on service development.

### **Overview**

Rotherham children's services reacted rapidly and effectively to the COVID-19 pandemic in the early months of 2020. Senior leaders ensured that, wherever possible, the services have continued to respond to need as they would have done prior to the pandemic. Technology and systems already in place enabled a quick

change in working arrangements to ensure that staff were supported to continue their work with children and families.

Strong and effective multi-agency partnerships enabled the early identification of vulnerable children. Senior leaders, managers and staff have effective oversight of children and young people who need to be safeguarded and supported.

Dynamic assessments of COVID-19 risks have allowed children to be seen directly when it is safe to do so. Detailed children's assessments enable proportionate decisions to be reached, ensuring that families receive an appropriate level of support. The voice of the child is a strength in assessments and influences care planning. However, the quality of written plans is not consistent for all children.

Effective pre-proceedings planning enables children to remain living with brothers and sisters or with extended family whenever possible. Children are supported to maintain contact with their families, utilising digital technology if required. Additional support to meet the emotional needs of children in care is available via the in-house therapeutic service.

There is a shortage of local authority placements for children in care. Senior leaders recognise this, and a sufficiency strategy is already in place, which intends to increase the number of placements available to children. However, the lack of available local placements means that a significant proportion of children live out of authority. In addition, some children are living in unregistered placements and sometimes for significant periods of time.

Good partnership working with schools has supported children's learning when they have not been in school due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there are delays in some children in care accessing education when they move placements. In addition, some children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) remain on part-time timetables for too long. This is recognised by senior leaders, and a specialist post has been created and an appointment made to support these children back into full-time education.

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

- The quality and monitoring of children's plans.
- Placement sufficiency to reduce the need for children to be placed out of authority and in unregistered provision.
- The timeliness of children in care accessing education.
- The timely return to full-time education for children with SEND.

## Findings

- Children and families receive services and support that are appropriate and proportionate to their level of assessed need. Effective partnership working between the local authority, schools and partner agencies has enabled vulnerable children to be identified and monitored throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Additional support is provided to support children's learning when they are not in school due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some children are benefiting from the provision of laptops.
- Early help services and children's social care are integrated, promoting positive working relationships and a clear understanding of thresholds. This has been maintained during COVID-19. Effective multi-agency working in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) and the wider partnership means that children and families receive an appropriate response to identified need. Families step up and down between the services at a time that is right for the child and commensurate with their level of need.
- Management direction and decision-making in the MASH are timely, appropriate and, in most cases, clearly recorded. Consent for checks in the MASH is sought from parents, or clearly recorded if dispensed with, if necessary.
- When a further assessment is required, children are seen quickly and alone when appropriate. Their views and experiences are captured through direct work that is suitable for their age and understanding. If children are reluctant to speak with social workers, partner agencies are consulted to gain an insight into children's wishes and feelings. Children's COVID-19 risk assessments are constantly reviewed so that direct visits take place whenever possible. Social workers are utilising creative means to keep in touch with families, for example by making effective use of technology. The voice of the child is a strength in assessments and is driving plans and decision-making where appropriate.
- The quality of children's plans is not consistent for all children. In some plans, specific needs are not always identified, not all actions have timescales and the outcomes to be achieved are unclear. The emotional needs of some children are not always considered or given adequate attention. Multi-agency meetings review the child and family situation, but it is not clear whether the plan is considered at every meeting, which increases the potential for drift in planning.
- When there are safeguarding concerns or risks increase, these are recognised and responded to in a timely way. Strategy meetings are well attended by all relevant agencies, which share appropriate information. These meetings have continued as virtual meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic. The recordings of these meetings are detailed, and there is a clear rationale for decision-making. Child protection enquiries are completed promptly, but the recordings of these enquiries are not consistently good.
- Risks associated with child exploitation are well recognised. This enables children to receive an appropriate level of support and intervention, which has continued throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Social workers work alongside a specialist

exploitation team and youth offending services to reduce the levels of risk to children. Child-exploitation assessments seen are completed effectively and reviewed to update levels of risk when required.

- Since September 2020, the number of children who are electively home-educated has significantly increased. This has created some capacity issues in visiting and monitoring these children. Senior leaders are aware of this issue and are currently undertaking a review of the service.
- Children are brought into care when it is necessary to safeguard them. There is robust oversight of children in the pre-proceedings stage of Public Law Outline (PLO) processes to ensure that there is no delay in decision-making. Within the PLO planning, extended family members are assessed in a timely way. This is enabling children to stay with family members if needed, and when it is safe for them to do so. Children's plans are progressed without delay, and social workers present detailed evidence to court. For most children, plans for permanence are considered at an early stage. Brothers and sisters remain together where appropriate. During the COVID-19 restrictions, family time has been maintained, and digital technology has been used appropriately.
- Children in care are seen regularly by social workers who know them well. Where direct visits from social workers have not been possible, other forms of contact with children have been maintained. Children receive a high level of care and support from their foster carers. Placements are meeting the needs of many children. Children's wishes and feelings are obtained and utilised to inform care plans where appropriate.
- In-house therapeutic services are effective in supporting the emotional well-being of children in care. These services offer support to foster carers and social workers to help them understand and care for children. When children have specific medical needs, these are met well, despite COVID-19 limitations on services.
- Children and carers receive additional support to maintain their placements so that children do not move unnecessarily. However, there is a lack of suitable local authority placements to meet children's needs. This has resulted in placement moves for some children and a significant proportion of children being required to live out of authority. In addition, some children live in unregistered children's homes, although all have exit plans and receive additional visits, looked after reviews and management oversight.
- Senior leaders are aware of the placement sufficiency issue and began implementing a placement sufficiency strategy prior to COVID-19. Investment has been made to increase local authority provision, and this work has continued throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Foster carer recruitment has been successful, with an increase in approvals. A new children's home, managed by the local authority, has recently opened, resulting in increased capacity in children's placements, but senior leaders know there is still more to do.
- Looked after reviews for children occur regularly and have continued to do so throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. They are attended by parents, carers and

professionals for the child. Children are encouraged to participate in their reviews through a variety of means. However, most reviews do not record in enough detail to evidence progress in meeting children's needs, that they have considered children's health or education. The minutes of the reviews are hard to follow, and actions are not specific to the identified needs.

- The two virtual school headteachers know their children well. Additional support is provided when required, and pupil premium plus is being utilised to support the acquisition of learning resources during COVID-19. In this year's GCSE results, the number of children in care obtaining grade 4 or higher in English and mathematics has improved. However, the quality of personal education plans is variable, and some plans do not sufficiently identify learning gaps due to lost learning during the pandemic.
- Most children in care attend a school that meets their needs. Attendance has been monitored effectively during COVID-19; 50% of children in care were attending school by the end of June 2020 and all returned to school in September 2020. However, for a significant proportion of children coming into care or moving placements, there are delays in them accessing education provision within 20 days of their placement. These children are missing their education entitlement. Additionally, some children in care with SEND have had reduced education provision for too long. Senior leaders recognise this and have recently appointed to a specialist post to support these children back into full-time education. These issues existed prior to the period of COVID-19.
- When young people leave care, efforts are made to keep in touch with them, even if their initial reaction is to refuse this support. Young people spoke highly of the support they had received from their personal assistants, who were accessible and with whom they had trusting relationships.
- Care leavers' pathway plans reflect their assessed needs for both practical and emotional support. Young people are supported to access appropriate housing, and an increasing number remain in staying-put arrangements whenever it is in their best interests. Young people are well supported to develop their independence skills, which allows them to move on when they are ready.
- Children and young people are encouraged to have a voice and influence the design and delivery of services. Senior leaders talked warmly of their input, and members of the Looked After Children Council regularly attend the corporate parenting board. The Looked After Children Council coordinator has been central in ensuring that laptops are available for members of the Looked After Children Council, and online sessions have been completed for approximately 50 children during COVID-19 restrictions. The focus of these sessions was mental health and well-being, getting children prepared for returning to school, and offering an opportunity to discuss any concerns.
- Managers have oversight at key decision-making points in a child's life. This is ensuring that assessments are dynamic and respond to changing circumstances and risk. However, assessment findings do not always translate well into children's plans. This makes it difficult for managers to monitor children's progress.

- Supervision of social workers has continued to be regular. This supports social workers to reflect on and discuss their practice in these changing times; however, the recording of supervision on the child's file does not always reflect any further actions needed. Social workers are encouraged to access online training and development opportunities, which they reported benefits their work with children and families.
- Senior leaders know the service well and are aware of the areas that need further improvement or development. There has been robust political oversight and support of performance during the COVID-19 pandemic. As far as possible, attempts have been made to maintain 'business as usual', utilising flexibilities within the regulations to facilitate virtual working. Partnership working within the council is a strength, and this has been sustained and improved in recent months.
- Senior leaders and managers have continued to engage with external agencies during the COVID-19 pandemic. An example of this is the engagement with the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service, which reported that senior leaders in the local authority are very willing to engage, work collaboratively and develop practice within the local family court. This has a positive impact on the practice of frontline practitioners and their work with children and families who are in the court process.
- Quality-assurance work has continued during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, some audits are not assessing the effectiveness or impact of social work interventions. This means that the impact of services on children and practice development needs is not always recognised and therefore not being addressed.
- The high turnover of social work staff, which is not related to COVID-19, has created some disruption and a short-term need for increased agency staff. This has resulted in some children experiencing changes of social worker and delays in their planning. Senior leaders have been responsive and have successfully recruited to these posts to promote longer-term consistency in the workforce.
- All workers spoken to feel well supported. Effective systems are in place to ensure that staff can work from home effectively. Staff welfare has been, and continues to be, a priority. Senior leaders are sensitive to changing local circumstances and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the workforce.

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

Yours sincerely

Matt Reed  
Her Majesty's Inspector