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Dear Ms Curley

Focused visit to Rotherham children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Rotherham children's services on 14 and 15 May 2024. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Rachel Fairhurst and Catherine Heron.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need or subject to a child protection plan.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers and managers. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

Headline findings

The response to children who are subject to child-in-need and child protection planning is very effective. A stable senior leadership team is unstinting in its determination to make children in Rotherham safer and improve their outcomes. Strong corporate support ensures a whole-council approach to understanding children's vulnerability and responding to risk and need.

Social care practitioners and multi-agency professionals communicate effectively with each other to coordinate the support they offer. Services are underpinned by an extensive range of early help and targeted support for children and their families. This preventative approach across all levels of need, vulnerability and risk extends beyond early help, also supporting children in need of statutory social work services. This is resulting in sustained improvement to the lives of many children and their families.

Children's needs and risks are mostly well assessed, and intervention is coordinated effectively by practitioners who are highly motivated to improve children's lives. Practitioners are well supported to do their best for children, by confident and knowledgeable managers. Managers continually monitor live performance data and quality assurance information to help practitioners understand what the quality of practice is like, and what this means for the families receiving the services.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The identification of children's unique needs and their individual characteristics to better inform their plans and how they will be helped and supported.

Main findings

When children require help and protection, they receive high-quality and effective support. The children's cases reviewed during this visit demonstrate that thorough assessments of need and risk result in the children and families receiving the right help and support at the right time. Practitioners and managers have a good understanding of thresholds of risk and need, which helps them to make the right decisions for children.

Assessments are undertaken by suitably qualified and experienced practitioners. Assessments are dynamic and proportionate and have actions that are time bound. They are informed by effective multi-agency information-sharing. They consider the history of the family and the context of any previous involvement with children's services. Children's unique characteristics and the impact of these on their daily experiences are not well considered in assessments, particularly when other children are the subject of the assessment. Senior leaders are aware of this shortfall. They recognise that while they have made some progress in all aspects of identifying children's individual cultural, ethnic and individual characteristics, more work is needed to ensure children's wide-ranging needs and experiences are fully understood.

Integral to all assessments is a strong focus on hearing and understanding the child's voice. Direct work with children and their families was in evidence in most of the children's records seen. Parental engagement is also a strong feature in assessments and children's plans. This work is supported by agile family network meetings, which are either swiftly arranged or pre-planned. These networks are used to support children and families to achieve positive outcomes. Family plans and arrangements are clearly mapped during these meetings, and this leads to finding safe, increased support and capacity within the family for children. This also ensures there is a safe network of adults around the child to reduce and manage risk.

Children and their families also benefit from a range of family support services that are delivered through joint working arrangements with other agencies. Support is tailored to the family's needs to maximise success. The ENGAGE service is targeted, intensive and outcome-focused. These interventions help to reduce risks to children

and improve stability within their family. While there is a wide range of family support services available, children are waiting too long for child and adolescent mental health services support following additional triage. Additionally, children and adults have lengthy waits for support from domestic abuse services. Senior leaders, including the chief executive officer, are actively engaged with senior leaders across the local safeguarding children's partnership to try to reduce waiting times and expedite service development.

When risks to children increase, practitioners lead effective multi-agency meetings to share information to identify, assess and respond to risks or concerns about the safety and welfare of children. Interventions and safeguarding enquiries are undertaken swiftly. Practitioners are responsive to immediate and emerging risks. Strategy meetings and section 47 enquiries are timely and appropriate. This robust information-sharing leads to the effective identification of risks and the actions needed to increase children's safety.

When children are at risk of specific types of abuse and harm, practitioners are effective in assessing the context in which the harm is occurring to decide on the most appropriate interventions. Responses involve the relevant agencies, and where appropriate, immediate safety planning takes place and/or initial child protection conferences are convened. Initial child protection conferences are timely and well attended by multi-agency partners who are working with the family. Children's records evidence collaborative and proactive work with multi-agency practitioners to help them understand children's experiences and daily life.

Overall, child-in-need plans flow well from assessments. They show how children will be helped and how risk should be reduced. They contain realistic safety plans to better safeguard children. They contain clear contingency plans that identify what will happen if children's circumstances do not improve and by when. Children's plans are reviewed regularly by the child's network of family and professionals. Progress against the child's plan is measured to ensure a continued focus on meeting the needs of the child and family and reducing risk. Children's records reflect the meeting discussions and outline the next steps and timescales for actions to be achieved.

Child protection plans are also detailed and contain clear actions and progress measures. These plans are overly long and present a challenge for those who may find it difficult to access or process lots of information. Senior leaders recognise this issue and have recently developed a child and family plan template, which is about to be trialled.

Core groups are held regularly and are well attended by agency partners. They use the chosen practice model effectively to measure children's progress, their safety and any positive risk reduction. If the risk to children does not reduce within the time frame that is right for the child, practitioners are well supported by confident and knowledgeable managers to take appropriate and decisive action to safeguard children.

Child protection review conferences are held regularly and are also well attended by agency partners. Child protection chairs apply additional scrutiny to the progress of plans in between reviews, with identified actions clear to practitioners and core group members about what is required to address any drift or delay. Where child protection arrangements and plans are repeated, there is strong senior management grip and oversight. When risks reduce, step-down from child protection plans to child-in-need plans is appropriate. Plans are tailored to the changing needs of the child and the family.

Children in need of help and protection are seen by practitioners in line with their plans. Visits to children are meaningful and well recorded. Practitioners work hard to form relationships with children and their families to improve communication and help achieve and sustain positive change. Children's voices are seen and heard and used where appropriate in decision-making and planning.

Frontline managers provide strong oversight of the services that children receive when they are subject to child-in-need or child protection plans. Social workers benefit from formal and informal case discussions with their managers. Recorded discussions contain evidence of reflective conversations about children's progress and what actions practitioners need to take. In most children's records, clear timescales are recorded for the completion of work by practitioners. This is helping to progress children's plans and improve their experiences within the child's time frame.

Senior leaders and council members are ambitious and aspirational for children who are subject to children in need and child protection planning. There is a 'whole council' response to making vulnerable children a priority. This is reflected in corporate decision-making and funding allocation.

Senior leaders know themselves well. They have a solid understanding and a good line of sight to frontline practice. They know the strengths and areas for improvement in this practice area. This is reflected in their self-assessment. Inspectors did not find any area for improvement in this practice area that senior leaders were not already sighted on.

Senior leaders ensure there are effective lines of accountability across children's social care. They are supported by an effective lead member and chief executive officer who are well informed about the progress of children in need and those who are subject to a child protection plan. Senior leaders work collaboratively to influence improvements across the whole council and promote a relentless focus on improving outcomes for children and their families. There is a robust appetite for improvement and holding to account those delivering services to children to perform better, which is helpfully assisted by a strong and effective local safeguarding children partnership chair.

Social care leaders use data confidently to scrutinise performance and quality assurance information at different levels to give them insight and help them understand child experience and service effectiveness in this practice area. Staff are inspired by leaders to perform well for children. Leaders and managers use real-time data to share with staff how well they are performing so that they can understand their impact.

All social workers spoken to during this visit were positive about working in Rotherham. They reported feeling safe and supported and that leaders have created an environment that enables them to do their best work for children. Social workers' development and progression opportunities are actively encouraged and supported by senior leaders. While caseloads are always fluid, overall, social workers report that they manage their caseloads and feel well supported by their managers. Inspectors found that caseloads were reasonable and in line with manager and social worker reports. They report that this allows them, mostly, the opportunity to build significant relationships with the children and families with whom they are working to provide help and protection.

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

Yours sincerely

Rachel Fairhurst
His Majesty's Inspector