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Sharon Hubber  
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Dear Sharon

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

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Rochdale children's services on 14 and 15 May 2025. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Teresa Godfrey and Nick McMullen.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need and those children subject to a child protection plan, including the assessment and support of private fostering arrangements, children in pre-proceedings and disabled children.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including children's records and discussions with social workers about their work with children. Inspectors also reviewed the local authority's quality assurance and performance management information.

### **Headline findings**

Since the inspection of children's services in January 2023, when the local authority was judged as requires improvement to be good, there have been changes within the senior leadership team, including the appointment of a new assistant director of children's services. The senior leadership team has initiated an ambitious restructure of children's services and introduced a new model of social work practice. The restructure has provided the opportunity for additional strategic and operational management capacity.

The quality and assurance framework has also been strengthened, and the director of children's services, through her 'achieving excellence' plan, has ensured that there is an appropriate focus on key areas of practice. These measures have equipped the senior leadership team and managers with improved oversight and understanding of the quality of social work practice in Rochdale. There are now effective tracking systems in place to ensure that children subject to pre-proceedings do not

experience drift and delay. Children are visited regularly, and most receive an appropriate assessment of need and response. Most children's plans are regularly reviewed.

Despite these improvements, there is more to do to ensure a sharper focus on children's experiences. Although an identified area of improvement, the action taken in respect of children living in private fostering arrangements has not sufficiently reduced risk to these children.

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

- The assessment and support of children living in private fostering arrangements to ensure that they are living with people who are safe and can meet their needs.
- The quality assurance and management oversight of practice to bring a sharper focus on children's experiences and outcomes.
- The quality and consistency of plans for children that are outcome focused and reflective of children's views and experiences.

### **Main findings**

Services for children are a high priority across the council. There is strong political support, reflected in child-focused decision-making and appropriate budget allocation. Leaders are ambitious for children and families in Rochdale. They have welcomed external scrutiny and support as they develop and further embed their model of practice and performance culture. There has been an appropriate focus on stabilising the workforce and in creating the right conditions to improve social work practice, with the aim of improving the overall quality of services for children and families.

Most children receive support and protection in accordance with their level of need and risk, with thresholds applied appropriately. When children's needs change, their cases 'step up' or 'step down' between child protection planning and child-in-need support. When children's circumstances improve and plans end, there is appropriate ongoing support to meet identified needs at a lower level through early help or universal services.

Children in need and those children subject to child protection plans receive support from a multi-agency professional network. Specialist workers undertake direct work, which helps to improve children's circumstances, and most children make positive progress. Their experiences improve because of the support that they receive.

For most children, their child protection plans are appropriately focused on the support and actions needed to ensure that risks are reduced. Most child protection plans describe what needs to change for children's experiences to improve but do not consistently capture children's wishes and feelings. Plans do not consistently

align with the work being completed by social workers, are not sufficiently time-bound and do not routinely capture what parents need to do to improve.

Child-in-need plans are mostly comprehensive; they outline actions to help parents to meet their children's needs. Some plans measure success by the completion of tasks rather than changes in children's experiences. Plans for disabled children are not always cognisant of their specific needs and vulnerabilities. This means that some disabled children are not receiving the right support at the right time.

Most children's plans are reviewed regularly. Review meetings and core groups are mostly well attended by key partners and family members to ensure effective information-sharing and ongoing planning. Children do not routinely attend their meetings, and this means that it is not always possible to see how their voice and influence have been considered. Plans are not consistently developed or adapted as a result of these meetings in line with children's changing needs or circumstances. There is variability in the effectiveness of conference chairs in robustly managing children's plans, and in providing appropriate challenge to those working with the family, to reduce drift and delay.

Social workers mostly understand the needs of their children and have developed positive relationships with them and their carers. Work with families to overcome barriers such as parental anxiety or resistance means that social workers can help parents to understand and address concerns. Most children are visited regularly by their social workers. Visits to children are not always purposeful and do not consistently ensure that children's lived experiences are captured and fully understood. The quality of the recording of visits is inconsistent.

For most children, when their lives are not improving and they are not being effectively safeguarded by a child protection plan, there is timely escalation into the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline. There is effective oversight of children through this process and families are offered the right support and direction to improve the care and protection of their children. As a result, there are an increasing number of children who have been able to remain living with their parents. This area of practice has significantly improved since the last inspection.

The response to children who are living in private fostering arrangements is not robust. Development activity has not sufficiently improved practice and the service received by this vulnerable group. Some children are not visited regularly, and they experience delays in assessments and statutory checks being completed. This means that leaders cannot be assured that children are living with people who are safe and can meet their needs.

Social workers in Rochdale receive regular supervision. There is variability in its quality. Social workers report that supervision supports them to reflect on their practice and offers challenge where appropriate. For some social workers, supervision is brief, lacking in critical reflection and not consistently considering children's experiences. Actions set within supervision are not consistently time-

bound. For most, they are process led and do not consider the quality and impact of social work practice on children and families.

Social workers told inspectors that their caseloads are challenging but manageable. They have access to relevant training and support. Most social workers expressed the view that the model of social work practice is supporting them to achieve better outcomes for children. Senior leaders routinely track and monitor workloads. They are aware that higher workloads impact practice and performance and aspire to reduce these.

Senior leaders have acknowledged that there has been a period of instability in Rochdale, with high social work vacancy rates and a reliance on agency social workers. This presented a challenge to embedding a performance culture and improving consistency in the quality of social work practice and subsequent outcomes for children. There has been an appropriate focus on the recruitment and retention of social workers. In the last 12 months, the workforce has stabilised and there has been a reduction in the number of agency social workers. There is now a more secure platform on which leaders can further improve and develop practice. Nonetheless, it is too soon to see the impact of this for all children.

The quality assurance framework has been strengthened since the last inspection and provides managers and senior leaders with a greater line of sight on practice. Inspectors found that auditors are sometimes over-optimistic in respect of the quality and impact of social work practice, and this means that leaders do not always have an accurate view of children's experiences. There are mechanisms in place to track and monitor practice issues, and regular performance 'clinics' are held, which result in targeted improvement activity. This work has led to some improvements for children. There is more to do to ensure that plans and improvement activity consistently improve children's outcomes.

Social workers report that senior managers are visible and accessible. Staff said that they enjoy working in Rochdale and told inspectors that they value the kind and supportive culture.

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

Yours sincerely

Teresa Godfrey  
**His Majesty's Inspector**