

Metropolitan Borough of Rotherham

Re-inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers

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Children’s services in Rotherham are good		
1. Children who need help and protection		Good
2. Children looked after and achieving permanence		Requires improvement
	2.1 Adoption performance	Good
	2.2 Experiences and progress of care leavers	Outstanding
3. Leadership, management and governance		Good

Executive summary

Services to children in need of help and protection are now good. The local authority has taken a systematic and rigorous approach to improvement since the last Ofsted inspection in 2014, which identified widespread and serious failures for children in need of help and protection and children looked after. The recruitment of effective senior managers has resulted in sustained improvement. The quality and impact of services for children are transformed. Risks to children are recognised early and responded to, ensuring their safety. The corporate response and associated change in the quality of children's services has been impressive.

Leaders and senior managers have appropriately prioritised the improvement of key service areas. This includes: ensuring a robust response to risk through the development of a multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH); embedding a culture of performance and quality assurance; stringent senior management oversight of frontline practice; and increased staff stability. The local authority is effective in its recruitment and retention of high-quality staff. Enhancing the workforce environment and, in particular, valuing frontline managers and staff have been essential components in securing change for the better.

The local authority is a learning organisation and fully utilises relationships with its improvement partner and other local authorities through peer reviews, in order to test practice and identify further areas for development. Senior managers and leaders have a comprehensive understanding of the quality of service provided.

Corporate ownership, well-cultivated partner relationships and increased financial investment enable the service to be highly responsive to local needs. This includes the creation of a dedicated multi-agency team to focus on complex abuse work and investment in identifying and supporting children who are at risk of sexual exploitation. The complex needs of children who did not become looked after soon enough due to historic failures are understood, and children are supported effectively through dedicated therapeutic services.

Families benefit from a broad range of early help services. Partners have grown in confidence in completing early help assessments. However, the early help offer is not sufficiently responsive to the needs of a small number of children, including children who have disabilities.

There is an effective multi-agency response to children in need of help and protection. Thresholds are understood and appropriately applied, resulting in swift protective action. Specific groups of vulnerable children and young people, including those who are privately fostered and young people who present as homeless, receive a well-coordinated multi-agency response that meets their needs.

Children become looked after when they need to be. The number of children becoming looked after has risen because of the improved identification of risk and the focused work on complex abuse. This increase has impacted on placement capacity and matching children who have more complex needs with permanent foster carers. A

previously unstable workforce, both in the fostering service and the locality social work service, meant that some children did not achieve permanence quickly enough. The development of a more stable workforce and the systematic review of children with a plan for long-term fostering who have not yet been formally matched are supporting improvements in the achievement of permanence for children.

The quality of court work is improving. Decisions to return children home to their parents are informed by good-quality assessments. Children benefit from early consideration of placement with their extended families.

Although management oversight is evident and supervision is regular, management challenge of the quality of practice and planning for children looked after is not consistently good. Most assessments identify risks and are of good quality, particularly those recently completed using the Rotherham family approach. For a small number of assessments, the cumulative impact of harm is not always considered well enough, and issues of diversity and identity are not fully explored.

For children looked after, assessments are not always up to date and some do not reflect sufficiently the complexity of needs or how these will affect the children's future requirements. For some children, a lack of sharpness in care plans can lead to drift and delays in permanence being achieved and broader needs being met. The local authority is working to address these areas of provision that require improvement.

Strong management oversight identifies children who have a plan for adoption. Matched children move in with their new families in a planned way without delay. Adopters experience an effective recruitment, assessment and training offer with bespoke support provided by the local authority's in-house therapeutic service. Wider family and friends of adopters access high-quality training to enable them to understand children's experiences. Life story work and later life letters often contain professional language, and are not completed in a timely manner for children who are placed in foster care or have a plan for adoption. Support for birth families is not sufficiently promoted or utilised.

Children have their health needs well met through timely health assessments and a dedicated therapeutic service. The local authority has successfully challenged schools that are using informal exclusions, which has resulted in an increase in formal exclusions. More work is needed to reduce these and persistent absenteeism.

Rotherham achieves excellent outcomes for a great majority of its care leavers. Since the last inspection, councillors and senior leaders have invested significantly in the care leaving service, expanding its capacity and providing excellent new facilities, including a dedicated drop-in centre and good-quality housing. Highly effective partnership working has developed a broad range of services that give care leavers access to good-quality housing, and opportunities to receive education and training, and to gain employment.

Contents

Executive summary	2
The local authority	5
Information about this local authority area	5
Recommendations	8
Summary for children and young people	9
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	10
The experiences and progress of children looked after and achieving permanence	16
Leadership, management and governance	27
Information about this inspection	33

The local authority

Information about this local authority area¹

Previous Ofsted inspections

- The local authority operates one children's home, which was judged outstanding in the most recent Ofsted inspection.
- The last inspection report for the local authority's children's services was published in November 2014. The judgements for the local authority were:
 - Overall effectiveness: inadequate
 - Children who need help and protection: inadequate
 - Children looked after and achieving permanence: inadequate
 - Adoption performance: requires improvement
 - Experiences and progress of care leavers: inadequate
 - Leadership, management and governance: inadequate.

Local leadership

- The director of children's services has been in post since January 2015.
- The chief executive has been in post since February 2016.
- The chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) has been in post since November 2015.

Children living in this area

- Approximately 56,593 children and young people under the age of 18 years live in Rotherham. This is 22% of the total population in the area.
- Approximately 25% of the local authority's children aged under 16 years are living in low-income families.
- The proportion of children entitled to free school meals:
 - in primary schools is 17% (the national average is 15%)
 - in secondary schools is 16% (the national average is 14%).
- Children and young people from minority ethnic groups account for 17% of all children living in the area, compared with 31% in the country as a whole.
- The largest minority ethnic group of children and young people in the area are Asian or Asian British.

¹ The local authority was given the opportunity to review this section of the report, and has updated it with local unvalidated data where this was available.

- The proportion of children and young people who speak English as an additional language:
 - in primary schools is 11% (the national average is 21%)
 - in secondary schools is 8% (the national average is 16%).
- In recent years, there has been a significant growth in the Eastern European Roma population, who have moved to the area from Slovakia, Czech Republic and Romania. These families are concentrated in a small number of town centre neighbourhoods.

Child protection in this area

- At 30 September 2017, 2,686 children had been identified through assessment as being formally in need of a specialist children's service. This is an increase from 2,612 at 31 March 2017.
- At 30 September 2017, 519 children and young people were the subject of a child protection plan (a rate of 92 per 10,000 children). This is an increase from 367 (65 per 10,000 children) at 31 March 2017.
- At 30 September 2017, seven children lived in a privately arranged fostering placement. This is an increase from four at 31 March 2017.
- In the two years before inspection, two serious incident notifications were submitted to Ofsted and one serious case review was completed.
- There was one serious case review ongoing at the time of the inspection.

Children looked after in this area

- At 30 September 2017, the local authority was looking after 518 children (a rate of 92 per 10,000 children). This is an increase from 485 (86 per 10,000 children) at 31 March 2017.
- Of this number:
 - 271 (or 52%) live outside the local authority area
 - 57 live in residential children's homes, of whom 75% live out of the authority area
 - nine live in residential special schools,² all of whom live out of the authority area
 - 404 live with foster families, of whom 49% live out of the authority area
 - 26 live with parents, of whom 27% live out of the authority area
 - seven children are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- In the last 12 months:

² These are residential special schools that look after children for 295 days or less per year.

- there have been 27 adoptions
- 51 children became the subject of special guardianship orders
- 214 children ceased to be looked after, of whom 4% subsequently returned to be looked after
- 25 young people ceased to be looked after and moved on to independent living
- one young person ceased to be looked after, and is now living in a house of multiple occupation.

The casework model used in this area

- The casework model used in Rotherham is known as the 'Rotherham Family Approach'.

Recommendations

1. Ensure that managers provide challenging, reflective and directive supervision and, with support from independent reviewing officers (IROs) and conference chairs, address the quality of practice and planning for all children effectively.
2. Ensure that all assessments are: meaningful to children and their families; reflect the changing needs of children; and effectively evaluate cumulative risks and their impact.
3. Ensure that all plans: are clear about how children's and young people's holistic needs are to be met; have clear timescales; can be understood by families; and are always well informed by risk assessment.
4. Ensure that early permanence planning is timely and considers the full range of placement options for all children when they are unable to return to their birth families.
5. Improve the timeliness of the early help response to children, particularly those who have a disability.
6. Work with schools to reduce the number of fixed-term exclusions and persistent absentees from education among children looked after.
7. Ensure that children benefit from timely, good-quality life story work and later life letters that are written clearly, so that young people will understand their experiences, life history and reason for separation from their birth families.
8. Ensure that birth parents of children who are adopted fully understand what support is available and are helped to access this.

Summary for children and young people

- All staff have worked very hard to make services for children better in Rotherham. They listen to and understand children's lives. This means that most children and their families who need help are able to get help when they need it to keep them safe.
- When children need to be protected from harm, social workers act very quickly, together with police officers, to make sure that children are safe.
- Most children who have been missing from home, school or care have the opportunity to talk with someone about where they have been. This helps workers to know how best to help children to prevent them from going missing again.
- Assessments for some children are too lengthy and difficult to understand. Managers know about this and intend changing them.
- There is more work to do to make sure that all children looked after have a good enough service. Some children move where they live too many times, and have too many changes in social workers.
- The members of the looked after children's council do a very good job of making sure that staff listen to them, so that they understand how to improve services for children in care and care leavers. This includes helping to recruit social workers and train foster carers.
- Children whose plan is for them to be adopted live with new families very quickly, and are able to live with their brothers and sisters when this is in their best interests. Adopters and their families and friends are very happy with the support they receive, which helps them to meet adopted children's needs.
- Care leavers in Rotherham receive an excellent service. Social workers and personal advisers work very hard to keep in contact with them and provide good advice on how they can look after themselves and keep safe.
- Care leavers have good places to live, with good education, training or work opportunities. Care leavers have support to prepare them for becoming adults, and to enable them to live independently.
- Social workers feel well supported when working with children in Rotherham.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection

Good

Summary

There has been significant progress in the identification and support of children in need of help and protection since the last inspection. Risks to children are recognised early and are addressed effectively in order to ensure the children’s safety. This has led to significantly more children being identified as in need of help and protection.

Children who are at risk of being sexually exploited are well supported by a specialist team, ‘Evolve’. This team demonstrates insight, expertise and understanding of the challenges of the work with children and young people. Children who have been missing from home and care receive an appropriately focused return home interview.

Strong partnership arrangements in the MASH ensure that children benefit from a timely and appropriate response when they need immediate help and protection.

Information sharing is effective and thresholds for access to services are understood and appropriately applied. Families benefit from a broad range of early help services, which are becoming more integrated with social care. This facilitates an improved and seamless delivery of services to children and their families. The local authority has worked with partners to build their confidence to complete early help assessments. However, early help services are not timely or sufficiently responsive to meet the needs of a small number of children.

Children’s social care has undergone significant improvement. This includes embedding the Rotherham family approach to improve the quality of social work practice. As a result, the quality of assessments and plans has significantly improved. This model continues to be rolled out across the whole workforce.

Most assessments seen by inspectors had the child at the centre, supported by effective direct work to ensure that the child’s voice is heard. Most children have their needs assessed promptly and their risks identified. However, for a small number of children, the cumulative impact of risk is not always sufficiently understood. Stronger assessments use the risk management model effectively to clearly focus on risk. This in turn is resulting in better plans. Most plans reduce risk and are reviewed regularly to monitor progress, although contingency plans are not always clear to families. The impact of identity and diversity is not consistently considered.

Social workers and early help professionals work hard to develop trusting and meaningful relationships with children, and use a range of communication tools to help them better understand the child’s world.

Inspection findings

9. Since the last inspection in 2014, the local authority has made significant progress in the identification and support of children in need of help and protection, including those who are at risk of child sexual exploitation. During this inspection, of the children's cases sampled, no children were found to be unsafe. Overall, children are effectively and more swiftly helped and safeguarded.
10. The early help offer has undergone considerable transformation so that there is now a shared strategic ownership and ambition with partners. The local authority, with its partners, revised and relaunched its new early help assessment, and has worked to support partners in completing these. Partner agencies are now undertaking assessments, demonstrating their growing confidence in the arrangements. Inspectors saw some very effective work with children and families. However, the provision of early help support for some children is not always timely. There are delays in some children being seen and assessed. This has included a small number of children who have a disability. This is a missed opportunity to respond to children's needs early. (Recommendation)
11. There is a wide range of accessible and good-quality early help services delivered through locality teams, youth services, children's centres and the troubled families offer. Early help locality teams are now co-located with social care and partners across the borough. This is improving communication and the delivery of responsive interventions and services in local communities. Resources and interventions delivered are informed by intelligence gathered from the top five issues identified from referrals to social care. For example, help is appropriately focused to provide parenting support and targeted help such as counselling, attachment-based family therapy and multi-systemic therapy. Feedback from families, schools and partners of the local authority demonstrates that early help is making a difference and that families feel supported at this lower level. Arrangements for stepping cases up to social care or down to early help are robust, and are supported through weekly management meetings.
12. Children in need of help and protection are protected through effective multi-agency working in the MASH. Confident, experienced social workers, and co-located multi-agency partners who understand thresholds and issues of consent, effectively screen and triage in the MASH. There are timely responses to contacts and referrals, as well as effective information sharing and decision-making by managers. Inspectors found no child left in a situation of unassessed risk. Children at risk of immediate harm benefit from a quick response, which ensures that they are protected and that risk is reduced. This includes the out-of-hours social work service, which provides a seamless and responsive service to protect children, along with good information sharing with daytime services.

13. Child protection enquiries and strategy meetings involve appropriate multi-agency representation that informs robust decision-making in order to protect children. Work with South Yorkshire Police on the conduct of Achieving Best Evidence interviews is beginning to improve the quality of joint social work and police interviews.
14. Child protection conferences are well coordinated, with mostly good multi-agency representation. Social workers prepare parents and carers well, enabling them to be fully involved in meetings. Children are offered the opportunity to participate at their meetings with the support of an advocate. Children do not stay on protection plans for longer than necessary as a result of the effective monitoring by child protection chairs. When change has not been achieved, appropriate assertive action is taken through escalation into pre-proceedings.
15. Having assured compliance with statutory requirements, the local authority is now appropriately focused on improving the overall quality of social work practice through the introduction of the Rotherham family approach. The quality of child in need and child protection assessments and planning has been significantly strengthened by the use of a risk management model to support child-focused practice. Most staff have been trained and are using this model, but it is not yet in place across all children's services.
16. The majority of assessments seen by inspectors, both in early help and where children are in need of help and protection, were of good quality. The stronger assessments use the risk management model effectively to clearly focus on risk. These assessments provide a good analysis and understanding of children's history and experience. Assessments are now conducted in a time frame that is proportionate to the identified concerns. The format of assessments on the electronic recording system means that they are repetitive and overly long, and can be impenetrable to read, so their impact and meaning can be lost to families. Assessments for a small number of children are not considering the impact of cumulative risks, particularly in respect of domestic abuse. Children's voices are not always explicit. Identity and diversity are only considered in very narrow terms. This means that, for a small number of children, services are not as well focused as they could be. (Recommendation)
17. The quality of care planning has also improved since the last inspection. Child protection and child in need plans, which use the risk management model, are good. They focus on the risks and identify specific, child-focused goals, which can be measured. Not all children's plans follow this model. A small number of children's plans do not describe the work that is being undertaken specifically to address children's broader needs, or do not detail children's views of their plans. Some timescales are vague, reducing the effectiveness of the plan in progressing a timely improvement in children's circumstances. Most plans do not include a specific contingency plan. This means that

families and professionals are not clear what will happen if children's circumstances do not improve. (Recommendation)

18. Child in need and child protection plans are regularly reviewed. Where children do not meet the threshold for child protection, there are a range of resources and services available. Partner agencies engage well in core groups and child in need meetings. Information sharing is effective, but not all meetings focus well enough on the quality or progress of children's plans.
19. Social workers see children regularly and alone; this enables them to build positive relationships with the children through direct work that uses a range of communication tools. Many case records demonstrate that children are listened to. The 'day in the life' exercise that is starting to be used provides a very powerful glimpse into the world of the child, and has clearly evidenced impact on plans for children. This represents an important change for children from the time of the last inspection. However, children who have a disability experience too many changes in social worker, which limits their ability to form meaningful relationships. The local authority has experienced challenges in recruiting social workers within this specialist field. Targeted recruitment of specialist social workers is ongoing while agency staff have been used to fill these posts.
20. Manager oversight and decision-making are evident throughout the child's journey. Senior managers have a tight grip on social work practice to provide assurance on decision-making. The leadership team has demonstrated insight and impressive forward planning and innovation in the development of a complex abuse team, in response to a specific need. These cases involve chronic neglect, and some children are at risk of child sexual exploitation. Inspectors saw evidence of high-quality assessments, effective plans reducing risk and tenacious social work practice. Assessments are forensic in detail, and contain extensive information about families and the risks that each family member poses. Plans specifically address interventions to help reduce risk. Social workers demonstrate an admirable tenacity in working with families, many of whom do not want to engage. They go above and beyond to monitor the children who remain in situations that are risky, but who may not have met a threshold for legal intervention to warrant their removal from parental care.
21. Children at risk of child sexual exploitation are identified and receive an effective multi-agency response to protect them. Children considered to be at medium and high risk of abuse receive good-quality help and support from social workers in the Evolve service. This is a dedicated multi-agency team that provides specialist support to children at high and medium risk of exploitation. Intelligence meetings between co-located police and social care managers, and additional multi-agency risk management meetings, take place weekly. Information is shared on risks to individual children, which helps to identify patterns of behaviour of suspected perpetrators. This has resulted in convictions and successful prosecutions. The local authority is embedding the

use of its child sexual exploitation risk assessment tool across all of its teams. The assessments seen by inspectors were of good quality and were being used to inform plans to protect children.

22. Immediate notification by police to the missing coordinator located in the Evolve service is effective, and gives an additional oversight of the identification of risks to children. Children reported missing from home and care receive the offer of a return home interview. The timeliness of the interviews and children's engagement with them continue to improve. Children who go missing regularly are appropriately escalated into child protection strategy meetings. While the majority of return home interviews completed are of good quality and identify push and pull factors, the information does not always transfer into children in need or child protection plans.
23. The local authority has very effective systems for identifying and tracking the whereabouts of children who are missing from education. Information is shared well between education, children's social care, early help and the police. This ensures that any safeguarding concerns arising from children not attending education are escalated quickly.
24. Risks posed to children and young people by domestic abuse and high-risk adults are considered effectively in multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC) and multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA). The local authority responds immediately to domestic abuse concerns through effective early screening in the MASH, and through the daily multi-agency domestic abuse meeting. There are limited perpetrator programmes, and Rotherham is part of a South Yorkshire-wide tender to introduce a non-convicted perpetrator programme to address this shortfall.
25. Young people aged 16 to 17 who present as homeless are well supported, and no young person is without suitable accommodation. There is a good range of accommodation options, including emergency crash pads and supported semi-independent accommodation, alongside support to develop life skills and independent living. Appropriate consideration is given to whether young people should be looked after to ensure that their welfare is promoted.
26. At the time of the inspection, there were seven children identified as living in private fostering arrangements. A dedicated private fostering worker ensures that children and carers are appropriately assessed and receive support as children in need.
27. Suitable arrangements are in place to identify children and young people identified as being at risk of radicalisation.
28. Allegations against professionals are robustly managed. All referrals to the designated officer are made through the MASH, which ensures that risks to

children are identified at the earliest opportunity and are appropriately managed. Evidence was seen of effective information sharing through allegations management meetings that resulted in clear actions, which are reviewed as required.

The experiences and progress of children looked after and achieving permanence

Requires improvement to be good

Summary

The local authority has improved the services it provides for children looked after since the last inspection. As a result of successfully delivering an extensive programme to review and restructure services, progress has been made in relation to the timeliness of court proceedings and the reduction of workloads, which means that children are seen regularly. Decisions to look after children are timely and planned in most cases. Children at risk of significant harm are now quickly identified. This has resulted in increasing numbers of children entering care appropriately. Children are beginning to benefit from early consideration of placement with their extended families. There is an improved fostering service and an excellent therapeutic offer to support children’s complex needs. The majority of care leavers achieve excellent outcomes.

Permanence is not yet achieved for all children soon enough. Assessments are not sufficiently robust or up to date to inform decisions about placement choice or identify broader needs. Brothers and sisters are often placed together in foster care, but children’s relationships, in terms of placement and contact needs, are not fully considered. Plans are not as sharply focused as they could be.

Historic instability in the workforce has meant that many children looked after have experienced changes in social worker and that too many children have experienced placement disruption and change, particularly those who have more complex and challenging needs. The local authority is aware of this, and is taking positive action to improve placement quality and choice in order to reduce disruption.

Children with a plan for adoption are identified quickly. Most children are placed with their permanent carers without delay. Life story work is not completed soon enough for children who are in foster care or who are adopted. The support that is available for birth families is not fully utilised or promoted.

Children’s health needs are well met and children benefit from a strong therapeutic offer. Despite overall education attendance for children looked after being high, at 95%, the proportion of persistent absentees among a small cohort of children looked after has risen. There is an improved focus on improving the educational outcomes of children looked after, and the attainment gap between the most vulnerable children and other pupils has begun to narrow. The local authority has successfully challenged the use of informal exclusions. It continues to challenge the increase of fixed-term exclusions for children looked after.

Inspection findings

29. Decisions to look after children are now made in the children's best interests. Children at risk of significant harm, including child sexual exploitation, are now identified quickly. This has resulted in increasing numbers of children entering care. In most cases, decisions about children entering care are made through the Public Law Outline (PLO) panel, improving the effectiveness of court applications and their timeliness. Services have recently been strengthened by the creation of an edge of care team offering multi-systemic services and family group conferences. While there are some early signs that these services are benefiting families, it is too early to see a sustained impact in terms of preventing children from entering care. Where the plan for a child is that they are to return home, there is purposeful and effective work. Robust assessments identify support to help the family to achieve and sustain change.
30. Legal gateway planning meetings and the PLO panel have been revised, and legal proceedings are now issued promptly where appropriate. The use of pre-proceedings is timely and effective. Letters before proceedings and contracts of expectations clearly specify the concerns. The local authority is revising these so that they are more accessible to families, as they are currently too lengthy and repetitive. The quality of court work has improved. Court proceedings are completed without delay and are in line with comparators. This is despite an overall increase in the number of proceedings that have been issued. This is the result of improved responses to neglect and abuse, and the review of children subject to section 20 accommodation who have now secured an appropriate legal status.
31. Court permanence teams are effective in improving the focus on early permanence. Children with plans for adoption or special guardianship orders (SGOs) are identified early. Children are beginning to benefit from early consideration of placement with their extended families. Thorough viability assessments ensure that children are placed safely. The number of foster carers being supported to apply for SGOs has also increased. These are very well assessed and supported.
32. Not all assessments are robust or up to date enough to inform decisions about placement choice or identify broader needs. The complexity of the needs of some children and how this may manifest in the longer term is not understood soon enough. This is contributing to increased placement disruption, and results in delays in achieving permanence for some children. Decisions about brothers and sisters being placed together are not always informed by assessed need, unless separation is being considered. Contact is promoted and most children see their families, but assessments do not demonstrate careful enough consideration of children's contact needs. Most contact agreements seen lack detail in terms of practical arrangements, focus and outcomes. (Recommendation)

33. Care plans are not always clear or focused enough. All children have care plans that are regularly reviewed, but these are not always updated and do not always sufficiently articulate how the child's long-term needs will be met. Permanence plans are agreed by the second review. However, where twin tracking has been identified, there is insufficient detail or action regarding how to take this forward. Inspectors saw some persistent challenge and escalation from IROs leading to positive results for individual children. This is a significant improvement from the last inspection, although their challenge is not yet influencing the overall quality of assessment and planning.
(Recommendation)
34. Timely permanence is not being achieved for all children. A number of factors have contributed to this. These include the impact of a high turnover of social workers, poor-quality assessments and plans not always being well informed or systematically updated to reflect change. Placement sufficiency for children who have complex needs has also been a barrier. Systems for monitoring children in long-term placements who are not matched for permanence have recently been introduced. Plans are beginning to progress for these children. Identifying and tracking the timely permanence of children by their second review is now in place through a recently established permanence oversight group. This is still in its infancy, and it is too early to see any impact.
(Recommendation)
35. There are insufficient placements to meet local need, particularly for children who have more complex and challenging needs. Senior managers recognise this and have implemented a number of changes. These include improvements to commissioning practice and quality assurance of out-of-area placements, both in fostering and residential homes. In addition, intensive support is provided to those children who are vulnerable to placement disruption. Careful attention is being given to increasing the number of local foster carers, particularly for those children who have complex needs and for brothers and sisters. The local authority took positive action to close its own poor-quality residential homes and commission good out-of-area placements. The proportion of children who live outside the borough is slightly higher than statistical neighbours but in line with the England average. The local authority has reviewed all children who are placed out of area, and has identified some who have been able to move closer to home when it is in their best interests.
36. Too many children experience placement changes and disruption before benefiting from a stable home. The local authority is taking robust action by initially prioritising those children and young people who are at the greatest risk of placement breakdown, through a successful intensive intervention programme pilot. Tracking children with high scores in strengths and difficulties questionnaires (SDQs) identifies children who require access to enhanced emotional support. This is improving stability for some young people. There is an improved focus on matching children with permanent carers. Placement planning meetings are taking place when there may be complexity of need. Team around the placement meetings are also held to

support the child in order to avoid placement breakdowns. Independent fostering providers are overwhelmingly positive about the partnership with the local authority, reporting effective information sharing and improved matching processes.

37. Over the past 12 months, senior managers have successfully recruited a number of permanent social workers. A successful reduction in caseloads now means that social workers see the vast majority of children regularly, although many children have experienced too many changes in social worker in the last year. Social workers are committed to building relationships with children and achieving better outcomes for them. Direct work with children is increasingly evident, and some imaginative and age-appropriate tools are used to capture children's wishes and feelings. Children are not yet benefiting from timely life story work, although the need for this to take place is recognised in many plans. This means that some children are not always being supported to understand their experiences and reasons for separation from their birth families. (Recommendation)
38. In the past 12 months, stringent efforts have been made to recruit permanent staff to the fostering service. Three new teams have been created and this has significantly improved the recruitment, supervision, review and support of foster carers. The quality of this support positively affects many people's decisions to continue fostering for Rotherham.
39. All children looked after have the opportunity to access a comprehensive advocacy offer. The independent visitor scheme is well promoted and take-up is good. Independent visitors have extensive training to ensure that they give children consistent support. Children are well supported to make complaints. Children are encouraged and supported to enjoy and access a range of social, educational and recreational opportunities. This is reflected in most children's assessments and plans. Enhanced payment, training and support are leading to an increase in in-house placements for children who have more complex and challenging needs.
40. The health needs of children looked after are carefully considered and routinely addressed through care planning. The vast majority of children now have timely initial assessments that are regularly reviewed. This is a significant improvement from the last inspection. A nurse practitioner working with older children and care leavers who have declined a health assessment has had a positive impact. The use of health passports is embedded. SDQs are used to good effect to identify children who need therapeutic support. The local authority has a comprehensive and impressive offer for therapeutic support, including for those children who are out of area. This includes an effective in-house therapeutic looked after children team that provides one-to-one support and a range of therapeutic interventions, and has recently piloted an intensive therapeutic intervention programme, which is preventing placement breakdown.

41. Children identified as being at risk of child sexual exploitation have safety plans and risk assessments in place, ensuring effective safeguarding. Children benefit from more timely and better-quality return home interviews when they go missing from care. Actions are not always recorded in children's care plans so that a single plan is worked to.
42. The quality of personal education plans (PEPs) has improved significantly since the last inspection. The completion rate of the now termly PEPs is high, at 96%. The great majority of plans contain specific, timed and measurable targets that focus on educational progress and the wider social and emotional development of pupils. Learning advocates from the virtual school attend every PEP review to ensure that there is a clear focus on educational attainment, and to hold schools to account for the performance of children looked after. The virtual school has developed rigorous systems for monitoring the school attendance of all children looked after. As a result, overall attendance for children looked after is high. Despite these improvements, the proportion of persistent absentees among a small cohort of children looked after has risen over the past two years at a faster rate than in similar authorities and the rest of the country. (Recommendation)
43. There is a much-improved strategic commitment and operational focus on improving the educational outcomes of children looked after. This has only just begun to close the gap in attainment between the most vulnerable children and other pupils in the borough. Managers and staff from the virtual school are assertive in challenging schools when they issue fixed-term exclusions, particularly when they are doing this informally, without reporting it correctly. The proportion of fixed-term exclusions for children looked after has increased over the past two years because of improved challenge and reporting. It is now well above that of similar local authorities. (Recommendation)
44. The quality of alternative provision available to children looked after in the borough has much improved since the last inspection, particularly at the two local authority pupil referral units. Managers acknowledge that they do not have a sufficient range of providers offering high-quality alternative education placements in the borough, and out of area, for the level of demand they need to meet.

The graded judgement for adoption performance is that it is good

45. Children, whose permanence plan is adoption, are now quickly identified. Since the last inspection, there has been an improving trend against national measures. This means that the vast majority of children are being placed with their permanent carers without delay. The recruitment of adopters is increasing, and adoption support provision has improved significantly. The service understands its children with a plan for adoption very well, and does

not give up when adoption is in the child's best interests. Placing brothers and sisters together is a particular success. Some children are placed with their adoptive families from birth because of effective early permanence planning.

46. Recent adoption performance data evidences a significantly improving picture of timeliness for children with an adoption plan, as compared to the time of the last Ofsted inspection. Highly skilled social workers and managers contribute to reducing delays for children in achieving permanence through adoption. Good links have been developed with locality social work teams and two court permanence teams. The court permanence teams have been introduced to increase the focus on early permanence planning. The co-location of the teams with the adoption and fostering service is highly effective, and has good potential to develop and improve practice further.
47. Experienced social workers support permanence planning and are tenacious in finding permanent homes for harder-to-place children. Successful adoptive placements have been achieved for older children and for keeping brothers and sisters together. The family finding process starts early. Effective use is made of adoption exchange, profiling events and adoption activity days. Children's profiles are very well written and convey a real sense of the child. This promotes timelier matching. Managers effectively track and chase children's plans following legal gateway decisions. Early planning meetings consider any complexities, extra needs or funding requirements. Formal reviews of the family finding plans are held frequently if no placements are found.
48. The quality of child permanence reports (CPRs) has improved since the last inspection, although some still do not reference expert reports or evidence the child's story well enough. Senior managers have taken positive action to address this through the recently established monthly quality assurance group (QAG). However, it is too soon to see evidence of the impact of this group. The agency decision maker (ADM) makes timely and considered decisions. The rationale for the decision is clearly recorded and feedback and challenge are given to social workers and the adoption panel. Panel members are well trained and child focused, and have a wealth of experience. The new panel chair is beginning to evidence improved scrutiny and challenge.
49. The prospective adopter's reports (PARs) represent adopters well. Fast-track assessments are undertaken when previous adopters wish to be considered for a second child. Approaches to previous adopters are managed sensitively when a brother or sister to an adoptive child has a plan of adoption. Matching is well considered by social workers and their managers, and reduces the chance of disruption. Disruption rates in Rotherham are very low. Independent social work reviews are commissioned after any disruption, and lessons learned are shared with the adoption team, the adoption panel and locality social work teams. Changes to practice have been made as a result, including the introduction of a 'pause and reflect day', which is now built into all transitions.

50. A refreshed recruitment strategy is increasing the numbers of adopters. Managers track and test the success of the strategy. The local authority remains committed to the principle of national adoption, but the final model is yet to be agreed. Rotherham is currently considering a joint venture with neighbouring authorities. A joint duty system runs in partnership with three neighbouring local authorities. This aims to recruit more adopters and place children in a more timely way.
51. All adopters spoken to during the inspection were very positive about their experiences. In particular, adopters reported a warm and friendly approach when they first registered their interest, and all experienced a smooth and sensitive assessment process, with excellent relationships with their social workers. There is a comprehensive training offer for prospective and approved adopters. The training process gives adopters enough time to think about what they are learning, and supports them to consider whether adoption is the right decision for them. Inspectors identified that there is innovative training available to the families and friends of prospective adopters, enabling them to understand and be responsive to children's experiences. This helps families and friends to see adoption through the eyes of a child, and to learn strategies for supporting the child and their loved ones through the process.
52. Adopted children are well supported in accordance with their assessed needs. Adoption support is highly effective and is provided by a dedicated in-house therapeutic team. The team does direct work with children, and commissions bespoke packages of support. The team is available to foster carers, social workers and adopters during assessment and post adoption. The team has a dedicated post-adoption therapeutic social worker who undertakes assessments and submits applications to the adoption support fund (ASF) where it is necessary to do so. Adopters report receiving a very quick initial response. Individually tailored wrap-around packages of support effectively meet needs. Support for birth parents and those affected by adoption is delivered by a commissioned service. While this is available to birth families, the service is not promoted well enough and is therefore underutilised. (Recommendation)
53. Children's social workers undertake life story work, which is improving in quality. Support from the therapeutic team is available to social workers to assist in this process. Direct work is available to help adopted children explore and understand their early history and the reason why they were adopted. While inspectors have seen many good examples of this work, not all children benefit from timely completion of their life story. This means that children are not supported well enough to explore their past and move positively into the future. Later life letters are completed in a timely way. They are mostly realistic and sufficiently detailed. Some contain professional jargon, which does not help the young person to fully understand why they could not

remain with their birth parents and why they were adopted.
(Recommendation)

The graded judgement about the experience and progress of care leavers is that it is outstanding.

54. The vast majority of care leavers in Rotherham now achieve excellent outcomes. Young people develop good independent living skills that enable them to make successful transitions to adulthood. A skilled and dedicated team of staff keeps in constant contact with the young people to ensure that they stay safe and are protected against harmful behaviours. Very effective partnership working has developed a wide range of services to provide access to good-quality housing, opportunities for education, training and employment, and good support for vulnerable young people during their transition to adulthood.
55. Social workers and personal advisers are tenacious, persistent and highly effective at keeping in touch with young people who have complex needs. Staff are attuned to their needs and the potential risks that they face. The quality and frequency of contact with care leavers is significantly enhanced through the recent opening of The Journey, a dedicated drop-in centre, which is co-located with the care leaving team's base. It offers an excellent range of facilities, including a recreational area, training rooms, a kitchen, and washing and showering facilities. Personal advisers use the space for one-to-one meetings with young people and for group work. It represents a safe place in which they can relax with their friends and call their own, and ensures that they always have somewhere to go and someone to turn to.
56. Social workers and personal advisers use the Rotherham family approach effectively in assessments and plans. It helps them to identify and explain the risks experienced by care leavers in a language that they understand. It is beginning to have an impact in terms of improving their independence skills, such as managing their finances and learning how to stay safe.
57. The majority of care leavers in Rotherham live in high-quality accommodation. The local authority and its partners have developed a broad range of housing options for care leavers, which enables them to climb up a ladder of different types of supported accommodation towards full independence. The council provides nine self-contained flats for care leavers from 16 years old who need support in developing the skills and habits of running their own household before moving onto an independent tenancy. A major housing partner offers a range of houses, flats and rooms for young people aged between 16 and 25, including care leavers, which provide varying levels of support. Additional support is provided to young pregnant women and those with newborn babies. Care leavers receive priority.

58. Care leavers can now stay with their carers after they have reached the age of 18. The numbers of young people who remain with their foster carers has grown significantly over the past three years, with further rapid growth projected over the next year as care leavers and foster carers gain a better understanding of how the staying put arrangements work. A dedicated coordinator supports carers, and those who choose to move on have a period in which to change their mind and return to their carers.
59. There is now excellent support for young people to help them move towards independence. The care leaving service and its partners put a great deal of energy, thought and planning into enabling the majority of their care leavers to make a successful transition to adulthood. This is particularly evident in the different types of support that are available to care leavers to develop their independent living skills. Care leavers are prepared well, with great care and perseverance, before they move into their own accommodation. They receive one-to-one support on how to apply for and manage their own tenancies. They are given guidance, the opportunity to practise negotiating with the suppliers of utilities, and advice on how to arrange their own housing benefits. In addition, sessions are run at The Journey on practical budgeting and basic cooking skills.
60. Personal advisers strike the right balance between providing support and enabling care leavers to make their own decisions, secure in the knowledge that they will always be given a second chance if they fail. As a result, the great majority of care leavers who move into their own properties sustain tenancies for more than six months.
61. Staff and managers are highly aspirational and have high expectations of young people. This helps to explain the fact that the proportion of care leavers in education, training and employment in Rotherham is higher than in similar local authorities. Rotherham is among the highest performing local authorities for this measure nationally, at 74% of 16 to 18-year olds and 64% for 19 to 21-year olds in education, training or employment. The local authority has increased the capacity of its virtual school and care leaver service to actively identify those who are most at risk of not achieving a positive destination, and to provide specialist support to engage them in some form of education, training or employment. The recent establishment of a forum for monitoring the progress of all care leavers not in education, training or employment, chaired by the head of the virtual school, has resulted in a more concerted focus being placed on those who have traditionally been reluctant to engage in formal education.
62. Managers have developed successful and effective partnerships with a wide range of providers, both in and out of the borough, who are adept at designing packages of training and support to meet the often-complex needs of care leavers. Local authority staff maintain close monitoring of the quality of the provision, and hold providers to account for their performance through regular reviews.

63. Having started from a very low baseline, the local authority is now exerting influence through the introduction of ring-fenced apprenticeships and work experience with the council. Councillors have exempted care leavers from the council tax charge, and have plans to provide free passes to leisure facilities in the borough. The Annual Pride of Rotherham awards celebrate the achievements of children looked after and care leavers.
64. Despite significant improvements in the completion rate of pathway plans since the last inspection, the current format of the plan does not provide a useful record of the actions needed to improve the outcomes of care leavers. The plan is too repetitive and does not set out clear, timed and measurable targets that are assigned to specific individuals to complete. In too many cases, the voice of the care leaver is missing, with the result that they do not see it as a useful document. Managers have recognised the deficiencies in the current plan and are about to implement a much-improved version.
65. The arrangements for the assessment and planning of the transition of disabled young people from the leaving care team to adult services are highly effective. Planning for transition starts early, from the age of 15, so a sufficient understanding of the needs and preferences of the young person and their carers can be built up before the final transition takes place. There are increasing numbers of disabled young people who are remaining with foster carers through staying put arrangements. These provide greater permanency and support for young people and their carers.
66. The local authority is improving transitions from children's to adults' services for young people who have been harmed by, or are at risk of, sexual exploitation. A multi-agency working group has been established, which is developing a framework, approach and terms of reference. Policies and procedures are now agreed and will be implemented in the near future.
67. Care leavers have ready access to services that can support them with their physical and emotional health needs. Personal advisers encourage their care leavers to adopt healthy lifestyles. Until the age of 19, care leavers can use the child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), after which they can access the council's in-house therapeutic services. There are a number of substance misuse voluntary sector providers, to whom care leavers can be referred and who run drop-in sessions at The Journey.
68. Care leavers are fully aware of, and use, their entitlements for furnishing their new tenancies, providing bursaries for training and paying for accommodation while they are in higher education. They use advocates well to support them with complaints and to represent their views. Lessons from complaints are used by managers to improve the quality of the service.
69. Managers and personal advisers use a range of creative informal strategies to consult with care leavers to obtain their views on the development of

services. Care leavers are involved in the recruitment and induction of new staff. The group of young inspectors, including care leavers, has just won a national award for the standard of its scrutiny of children's and young people's services. A recently established formal forum is starting to demonstrate influence in shaping the impact of services. For example, it recently reframed the plans for the location and size of a new build for care leavers' accommodation. However, the group would benefit from increased membership to replicate the success of the looked after children's council.

Leadership, management and governance	Good
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Summary

Senior leaders and managers in Rotherham have made significant progress and transformed children’s services since they were judged inadequate overall at the last inspection in 2014. Strengthened governance structures, with a new senior leadership team and new political members, ensure an openness to learning and transparent decision-making across the service, increasing accountability. Children’s services are a priority for the council and are well supported by increased corporate financial investment to improve outcomes for children.

An effective workforce strategy and the creation of a dedicated recruitment team for children’s social care are creating stability across the workforce and attracting high-quality permanent early help staff and social workers who are committed to working in Rotherham. The offer of career development, investment in training and learning opportunities is improving interventions and consistency for children.

Senior managers and leaders know the service they provide well. The culture is now one of openness and transparency and genuine dedication to improving the lives of children and young people. The local authority uses peer reviews and Ofsted monitoring visits, and works with other local authorities to understand its strengths and areas for ongoing development. It has access to comprehensive and live performance information following the implementation of a new electronic filing system and the local development of an effective online performance portal and dashboard. This ensures that the authority has immediate, effective oversight of frontline practice and compliance activity. A revised quality assurance framework and a ‘beyond auditing’ tool give managers significant knowledge of the quality of practice.

Strategic partnerships are much strengthened, improving the way in which children are helped and protected. This includes resourcing of the MASH, engaging in early help assessments and a commitment to tackling child sexual exploitation. Rotherham has effective governance and multi-agency procedures that help to identify and protect children from child sexual exploitation.

Improved identification of risk and continued focus on uncovering and tackling complex abuse have led to increased demands on social care. This will continue to remain a challenge. A recent increase in the numbers of children looked after has placed additional demands on placements. Some of this increase is due to improvements in identifying risk, and to the local authority’s complex abuse work. Senior managers have plans in place to manage this demand. Some will take time to embed.

Inspection findings

70. Senior leaders and managers have made significant progress in improving services for children and their families since the previous inspection, in 2014, judged them to be inadequate. The appointments of a dedicated and effective strategic director for children's services in January 2015, a chief executive in February 2016, and a new lead member have focused and improved services, and are making a real difference to children. Managers and leaders are effective in managing the current increased demand for statutory services, while working to improve the lives of children who have significant complex needs. Work is well focused on addressing the needs of children and young people who have previously received a very poor service from the local authority.
71. The local authority and its partners are aware of the continuous demands they face through targeting complex abuse. They are not complacent in the approach they take in order to better understand, continue to identify, and address the large-scale serious abuse suffered by children and young people. Managers, leaders and partners are diligent in their ongoing efforts to expose both current and historic exploitation. This is seen in the number of successful prosecutions and ongoing court trials of perpetrators. Support to encourage children and young people who have suffered abuse helps them to feel safe enough to disclose their experiences and continues to develop. This includes services for those who are now adults. The stringent efforts of the local authority and partners to confront large-scale exploitation and abuse will continue to have its challenges, as victims continue to be identified.
72. Managers and leaders understand previous inadequacies in children's services. The service has embedded effective challenge into its day-to-day work. This, alongside service re-structure, has led to significant changes in staffing, which have resulted in some managers and social workers leaving the local authority. Assertive action was taken to close three of its residential homes due to inadequacies. The pace of change is impressive, and a change in culture across the local authority has created the right conditions for social work to flourish, enabling good support and high challenge across the workforce. A new culture of openness and transparency is evident. Managers have made good use of peer challenges, Ofsted monitoring visits and the work with its improvement partner to test the effectiveness of its services and identify further areas to improve. This work is beginning to have a positive impact on the quality of services that children and young people now receive.
73. Clear lines of accountability and robust governance arrangements demonstrate that safeguarding is a council priority, and effectively hold senior managers to account. An additional layer of scrutiny through the development of corporate safeguarding meetings, chaired by the chief executive, and the ongoing implementation towards Rotherham becoming a 'child-friendly borough' demonstrate a clear vision for improving children's lives. The improving lives select committee and attendance by the chair of the

Rotherham Safeguarding Children Board (RSCB) at the improvement and performance boards bring additional independent scrutiny to governance arrangements.

74. The lead member is a positive advocate for children and young people. He is highly active in understanding and improving outcomes for children and young people. The corporate parenting panel (CPP) is effective. The CPP has regular oversight of performance information and data, enabling it to monitor the progress of children. The CPP has successfully championed care leavers' exemption from paying council tax charges and priority access to mental health services, to improve the emotional well-being of children looked after and care leavers.
75. Members of the looked after children's council speak positively of their involvement in corporate parenting panel decisions and they feel listened to. These young people support service development by representing children looked after on interview panels for staff recruitment and participating in foster carer training. They are also becoming increasingly involved in the strategic agenda by attending and contributing to regional participation events. A recently established care leaver's council now in place provides direct input into the development of services to support care leavers. The panel and managers know they need to give more children the opportunity to have a voice and to participate in decision-making, including children looked after living out of the borough and disabled children and young people.
76. As corporate parents, senior managers have significant understanding of the needs of the children they look after, and the sufficiency strategy clearly identifies placement needs for children. Managers know that too many children live outside Rotherham, and that some of the increased complexities of children's needs are the result of historical poor practice and children becoming looked after too late. Responding proactively to these demands, senior managers have revised and enhanced the offer to local authority foster carers and the therapeutic support for children who have complex needs. They have also implemented a range of interventions to support families, for example family group conferences, multi-systemic therapy and edge of care services. These solutions will take time to embed, but have started to improve outcomes for some children looked after. In addition, commissioning managers continue to develop positive relationships with providers, and there is more robust monitoring of these arrangements. A relatively new joint commissioning strategy with health partners is beginning to have some success for CAMHS.
77. Senior managers have developed strong partnership arrangements and relationships that deliver effective services to children, which are evidenced within the MASH and through the improved identification and protection of children at risk of child sexual exploitation. Relationships between the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) and the local authority senior managers are positive, supported by regular meetings

and a willingness to learn and improve. The quality and timeliness of court work has improved. Partners' increasing understanding and trust of thresholds are further supported by co-located staff delivering a comprehensive early help offer and by improved confidence in completing early help assessments.

78. Significant effort and focus on child sexual exploitation mean that effective multi-agency systems and processes are better identifying and protecting children from child sexual exploitation. The Safer Rotherham Partnership, the Health and Wellbeing Board and the children and young people's partnership have aligned their priorities to ensure a strong strategic oversight of current and potential risks to children, for example by working with health partners to provide ongoing and therapeutic support for victims. The creation of a dedicated multi-agency service, Evolve, with co-located social workers and police, is a strength. Multi-agency partnership arrangements are effective and demonstrate a commitment to identifying, pursuing and prosecuting perpetrators of abuse. The results of this have been seen in the impressive number of convictions and the lengthy sentences that perpetrators have received. Trials of those arrested a long time ago are still ongoing. Joint commissioning arrangements with partners, including the police, for example the ReachOut service, help to raise awareness of child sexual exploitation risks in the community and include an appropriate focus on early identification, prevention and support.
79. Performance reports, audits and governance of child sexual exploitation give senior managers and their partners a good knowledge of operational activity. Child sexual exploitation champions across teams raise the profile of the child sexual exploitation toolkit and support staff in embedding this into practice. When they are completed, the majority of reports and audits are of good quality, regularly updated and used effectively in safety planning. Safety plans for a few children do not align well with child protection and care plans for children looked after to ensure that children, their families and partners are clear about what needs to happen next.
80. Operational responses to children missing from home, school and care are secure, and there is effective oversight from the strategic missing group. A recent management decision, agreed by the improvement board, to transfer the missing coordinator from the MASH to Evolve is proving to be effective, and gives an additional check and balance to decision-making. Inspectors saw good use of this oversight and challenge from the missing coordinator, helping to identify additional risks to children. Timeliness of return home interviews for children is improving, and information and intelligence are collated to inform plans. Senior managers recognise that the timeliness of return home interviews for children looked after and living out of the borough needs to be better and they have a commissioning plan in place to address this.
81. Senior managers and partners lead on impressive planning, preparation and intervention to protect children subject to ongoing complex abuse

investigations. This has included the swift mobilisation of resources to create a dedicated team to focus on this abuse. This work has a particular focus on identifying generational neglect and child sexual exploitation among specific cultural groups in the community, and demonstrates exceptional partnership working, both locally and nationally, to safeguard children. This includes the creation of an additional social work team and financial corporate support. As a consequence of these investigations, the numbers of children looked after in Rotherham have increased, resulting in additional pressure on the local authority's ability to meet its sufficiency duty. Dissemination of learning from this work is in the early stages of preparation for sharing across the locality social work teams.

82. Investment in a new children's case-recording system, and the availability of an impressive suite of live performance data published through an online performance portal and dashboard, mean that senior managers and leaders have shared oversight and understanding of operational frontline practice. Staff working in early help services and social workers use a new and much-improved integrated children's recording system that supports the monitoring of compliance. Daily review of the portal leads managers to question changes in data and results in quality checks. The portal gives all managers and officers the ability very quickly to access individual children's information. Fortnightly performance clinics in each service area hold team managers to account, and a comprehensive escalation process is in place when concerns for individual children are identified.
83. Senior leaders and frontline managers know their service well. A successful focus on compliance activity means that the local authority now meets its statutory responsibilities well. A revised quality assurance framework and the increased stability of the workforce mean that leaders are gradually able to shift from directive management to management where frontline managers are confident and know what good services look like for children. A comprehensive auditing programme and the 'beyond auditing' tool reflect continuous improvements in the quality of services provided for children. Senior managers are aspirational for children in the borough and know that services for children are not consistently good across all service areas.
84. Senior management oversight of practice is effective and remains necessary so that senior managers can test and verify the decision-making of frontline operational managers. Operational management decision-making and oversight are evident. Supervision is regular, but is not offering consistently good challenge of the quality of some social work practice; nor is it ensuring swift progress against plans. Timescales against actions are not always clear, leading to drift of completion. The investment in a reflective social care model and its rollout across the service are demonstrating clear improvements in the quality of children's assessments and plans, and show that there are improvements in the analysis of risks. This is being used as an effective supervision tool in some cases, reflecting on the needs of children and young people and providing direction. At the time of inspection, not all staff or

managers had received training, and the model is not yet embedded across the service. (Recommendation)

85. There has been significant energy, financial investment and focus, from the beginning of Rotherham's transformation journey, on creating the right workforce environment for social work to flourish. Senior managers have demonstrated tenacious dedication to implementing a strong recruitment and retention strategy. This has successfully increased stability in the early help and children's social care workforce, and has successfully reduced the local authority's use of agency social workers, which was 16% in September 2017 compared to 22.5% in January 2017, with a high of 44% in 2015–16. There are still some challenges in recruiting specialist disabled children's social workers. Social workers have lower, more manageable caseloads, and this means that they are able to build positive relationships with children and spend more time with them. The local authority was shortlisted at the National Social Worker of the Year Awards in the category of social worker employer of the year. Some children looked after have experienced too many changes in social worker, so they do not have the opportunity to build trust and rapport with them. Plans are in place to address this.
86. There is a strong culture of learning throughout the council, which is consistently promoted by senior managers. Staff across early help and children's social care report positively on training, development and career progression opportunities. Investment in advanced practitioner posts and coaching and mentoring for all managers support their capacity to implement the reflective social work model across the service. This, combined with restorative practice, enables staff to help children and their families to understand what needs to change to improve children's outcomes. This is beginning to develop pace across the service.
87. Senior managers actively participate in peer reviews, welcome the intervention and support from their practice partner and implement learning. A recent pilot of the new social work accreditation scheme within the children looked after service helped to successfully identify staff skills, knowledge and training requirements, to help prepare them for national implementation; this is due to be rolled out across all teams. The strategic director is visible to frontline practitioners and, in partnership with the lead member for children's services, completes monthly practice learning visits to teams. Subsequent three-monthly follow-up checks ensure that the implementation of agreed recommendations helps staff to understand that learning and reflection of practice is a strength. Staff spoken to by inspectors reported increased stability and trust in their management team. They feel safe and want to work in Rotherham.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences of children and young people who have needed or still need help and/or protection. This also includes children and young people who are looked after and young people who are leaving care and starting their lives as young adults.

Inspectors considered the quality of work and the difference adults make to the lives of children, young people and families. They read case files, watched how professional staff work with families and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care given to children and young people. Wherever possible, they talked to children, young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the local authority knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

The inspection of the local authority was carried out under section 136 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

The inspection team consisted of six of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) from Ofsted.

The inspection team

Lead inspector: Lisa Summers

Deputy lead inspector: Julie Knight

Team inspectors: Jan Edwards, Alison Smale, Tracey Metcalfe, Charles Searle

Senior data analyst: Clare Atkinson

Quality assurance manager: Sarah Urding

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Piccadilly Gate
Store St
Manchester
M1 2WD
T: 0300 123 4234
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.ofsted.gov.uk
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