

IMPROVING LIVES SELECT COMMISSION
Tuesday 10 February 2026

Present:- Councillor Monk (in the Chair); Councillors Adair, Bower, Brent, Clarke, T. Collingham, Elliott, Fisher, Harper, Steele, Ms. L. Hickey, Mr. M. Hemmingway and Mr. J. Newman.

Apologies for absence:- Apologies were received from Councillors Blackham, Garnett, Hughes, Ismail, Pitchley and Sutton.

The webcast of the Council Meeting can be viewed at:-

<https://rotherham.public-i.tv/core/portal/home>

28. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 2ND DECEMBER, 2025

Resolved:- That the minutes of the meeting of the Improving Lives Select Commission, held on 2nd December, 2025 be approved as a correct record of proceedings.

29. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

30. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

There were no items of business on the agenda that required the exclusion of the press and public from the meeting.

31. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND THE PRESS

There were no questions from members of the public or press.

32. CORPORATE PARENTING PARTNERSHIP BOARD UPDATE

Councillor Brent, Vice-Chair, provided an overview following the last two meetings of the Corporate Parenting Partnership Board held on 9th December, 2025 and 3rd February, 2026.

In December the Board received an update following the Ofsted inspection of Children and Young People's Services. Although the formal judgement could not be shared at the time, the judgement had since been published.

Young people from the Children in Care Council presented their views on what made a good home, aligning with Priority Six of the work plan. Their input, supported by preparatory discussions with the Fostering Champion and Assistant Director, emphasised the importance of stable relationships, commitment and everyday essentials that contributed to a

sense of safety and belonging. Officers provided a complimentary presentation on the qualities required from carers, showing strong alignment between service priorities and young people's lived experiences.

Further updates included a progress report on the action plan, headline performance indicators for children in care, and a joint presentation from the ICB and RDaSH on emotional and physical wellbeing. This highlighted ongoing work within the wellbeing group, new health priorities and improvements in areas such as dental and health check recording. Annual reports from Voice and Influence and the Independent Reviewing Officer were also shared for Board review.

At the February meeting, alongside a previously reviewed Ofsted update, the Board received a powerful and candid account from a young person in care. He described the impact of housing, financial pressures, loneliness, and unsafe environments on his wellbeing, stressing the importance of supportive relationships. His testimony prompted immediate responses from leaders in Social Care and Housing, who acknowledged the challenges raised and outlined opportunities to strengthen support for young people. Owing to the significance of his contribution, the agenda was adjusted to give it proper consideration and then went on for Board Members to provide further feedback to the Service Director for Social Care regarding the draft Corporate Parenting annual report.

Resolved:- That the updates from the Corporate Parenting Board be received and the contents noted.

33. OFSTED INSPECTION OF LOCAL AUTHORITY CHILDREN'S SERVICES SHORT INSPECTION NOVEMBER 2025

Consideration was given to the report which advised the Improving Lives Select Commission of the outcome of the Inspection of Children's Services by Ofsted in November 2025. This was a judgement Short Inspection and the Local Authority received an Overall Effectiveness grade of Outstanding. All sub-categories also received a grade of Outstanding with the exception of 'the experiences and progress of Care Leavers', which received a Good. There were two improvement actions, both related to Care Leavers.

In inviting introductions to the report the Chair wished to place on record her congratulations and thanks and appreciation for all the hard work involved by all in this result. This was also endorsed by the Select Commission.

Councillor Cusworth, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member, introduced the report which provided an overview of the recent Ofsted inspection and summarised the key findings, areas of strength and priorities for improvement identified during the visit.

It also outlined the actions already underway in response to the inspection, as well as the next steps required to ensure continued progress. Bringing this to Scrutiny supported transparent oversight, enabled constructive challenge and helped to ensure the Council remained focused on delivering the best possible outcomes for children, young people and families.

Moving forward there was no sense of complacency. Activity within Children's Services had not slowed down and all involved would continue to work hard to maintain high standards and to address the areas identified for improvement, particularly in relation to care leavers and the few specific actions highlighted by Ofsted.

The Chair invited the Executive Director to deliver her presentation which covered:-

- Background to the ILACS Short Inspection.
- Judgement Criteria.
- Outcomes:-
 - ❖ Children who need help and protection – Outstanding.
 - ❖ Children in care – Outstanding.
 - ❖ Care leavers – Good.
 - ❖ Impact of leaders – Outstanding.
 - ❖ Overall Effectiveness – Outstanding.
- National context – Top 10.
- Overall Assessment.
- Detail of the Judgement – Help and Protection.
- Detail of the Judgement – Experiences and Progress of Children in Care.
- Detail of the Judgement – Care Leavers.
- Detail of the Judgement – Impact of Leaders.
- Impact on Staff.
- Actions that were needed.
- Final Words.

Councillor Cusworth, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member, emphasised the importance of staff stability in Rotherham and the significant difference it made to the work taking place. Rotherham had low agency staffing rates which meant the authority was in a strong position regarding locality vacancies. That stability was essential to achieve "Outstanding".

Furthermore, the senior leadership team had been stable for some time and remained very strong.

One area that remained strong was the Virtual School. Many places only had one head of Virtual School; Rotherham had two, one for primary and one for secondary and both worked tirelessly to ensure that Personal Education Plans (PEPs) were completed from birth, meaning babies'

development was now fully captured.

Rotherham also had one of the strongest youth voices through the Care Leavers' Forum and the Children in Care Council. Young people also sat on the Children and Young People's Partnership Board, which fed into the Rotherham Together Partnership Plan. Young people were helping to shape priorities, including those of the Health and Wellbeing Board clearly showing how joined-up the system had become.

The Commission were encouraged to visit The Journey to view first-hand the events that were run to support young people.

Finally the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member wished to place on record her own thanks to the Executive Director and her team for their hard work and to all who had contributed to this journey.

The Chair invited questions from the Commission and a discussion and answer session ensued from officers with the following issues raised and clarified:-

- Care leavers in Rotherham benefitted from Council Tax exemption so were officers engaging with other regional areas to improve reciprocal arrangements so that young people who lived out of the borough had the same rights and entitlements.

It was confirmed regional discussions were ongoing across Yorkshire and the Humber about improving support for care leavers. Rotherham had gathered a list of possible "quick wins" to explore with other Councils and conversations were taking place with Directors of Children's Services across the region. The Government had encouraged Councils to consider care leavers' needs, but there was no new legal duty. Locally, Councillor Cusworth was leading work on what could be offered region-wide such as leisure passes and transport support.

Most Councils, including Rotherham, already provided council tax exemption for care leavers. The main challenge was housing priority. Rotherham gave all care leavers priority one status, meaning they could access accommodation immediately. Many other Councils used priority two, reserving priority one for emergencies like domestic abuse. The aim was to negotiate a consistent priority one offer across the region, although this required agreement from housing teams, which could vary in flexibility. Some Councils, such as Barnsley, already reciprocated Rotherham's approach. Overall, the regional work was progressing and Rotherham was ahead of many areas.

- Following a visit to The Journey were there any plans to develop the offer for young people further. For example, what about engaging with young people more around financial planning as they become

increasingly independent or on the health side were there any initiatives being created that encouraged young people to adopt healthier lifestyles.

The Council were committed to building on the offer at The Journey, which, as a large house, had lots of different facilities such as places to wash, cook, study and support to applying for employment.

The Journey was also a place young people could come if they were feeling a bit low or had a difficult day. Emotional support was offered. An example was shared about a young person who was comfortable enough to come into The Journey to rest on an informal basis.

Regular drop-ins were also available and the DWP were regulars as was the named nurse who provided advice on a wide range of health issues. There were links with the Prison Service to support work with young people who have been in and out of custody and to reintegrate into society and reduce the risk of them returning.

- Looking at the toolbox, the service had been graded 'good'. Officers were asked how long it would take to address the areas for improvement and would Ofsted be returning to inspect those specific elements.

The report by Ofsted was considered realistic and a genuine reflection of the work happening in Rotherham. This evidence-based 'good' had clear areas to improve and the service were confident that the two actions identified could be addressed in a short space of time.

One issue was linked to the case management system, which was in the process of being upgraded. Necessary changes could not be made until that upgrade was complete accounting for a short delay. The work on health histories was also a specific and manageable task.

By September it was anticipated all actions would be fully completed and embedded. There were also some broader developments needed within the Leaving Care Service and this would be ongoing.

Ofsted would not return to Rotherham for another full judgement for three years so a further inspection was not expected until 2028 at the earliest.

Additionally, Ofsted were currently consulting on changes to their inspection framework, including the removal of overall grades and mirrored recent changes in school inspections.

The Corporate Parenting Partnership Board Annual Report would also be presented to Improving Lives shortly. Elected Members on

the Board championed a specific area and attendance was popular. A significant amount of work was, therefore, happening between meetings with clear commitments to corporate parenting responsibilities.

- With the changes and upgrade required to the software would this allow for a more responsive case management system that operated in real time.

The current case management system, Liquid Logic, was widely used by local authorities but was often slow. Although an upgrade was underway replacing older parts of the system, it still would not be instantly responsive or modern like consumer apps.

The Council did have staff who could make changes within the system, but implementing upgrades could cause delays and create a backlog of requested tweaks. A key issue was that pathway plans sat at the very end of a long chain of processes in the system. This meant that making changes to pathway plans often required changes earlier in the workflow, making the process more complicated than expected.

Overall, the upgrade would help, but improvements would still take time. This was a wider issue across local authorities and not specific to Rotherham.

- What access was there to physical and mental health support for care leavers?

All care leavers have access to general health services. Once they become adults and citizens of Rotherham they could use all services available to any other resident. They also received some additional support, such as subsidies for schemes like Rothercard.

There was also a specific health offer in place and a service had been commissioned from RDaSH, which originally provided support for children and young people aged 0 to 19, including those who had been in care or were care leavers. However, because care leaver legislation extended support up to age of 25, this left a gap. Following a review of the contract this now included mental health and emotional wellbeing services for care leavers up to the age of 25.

Care leavers also have access to the Council's employee wellbeing service.

Additionally there was now also a panel that considered individual requests from young people if they had an additional need or required something specific when funding could then be granted.

Discussions have also taken place in Overview and Scrutiny Management Board about discounted swimming for people over 65. Places for Leisure who run Rotherham's leisure centres already offer free swimming for all children in care and care leavers, a scheme that had been running for two to three years. This included free swimming lessons for those who were unable to swim.

Places for Leisure have also been offering free six-month gym memberships for care-experienced young people. These offers reflected the commitment to support young people.

- Did the Council have adequate projection for Personal Advisers for the number of children preparing to leave care?

Rotherham experienced a sharp rise in the number of children entering care around five to six years ago due to serious safeguarding concerns at the time. This led to a temporary surge, which now meant there was a corresponding spike in the number of young people reaching eighteen and becoming care leavers. Although this peak was challenging, numbers were expected to decrease again as the system had since stabilised and returned to more proportionate care entry levels.

The service had planned for this spike, carrying out detailed workforce analysis and ensuring there were enough Personal Advisers including specialist roles. Leadership was proactive in securing extra staffing when needed and resources could be shifted or increased to maintain support. Ofsted had praised the Personal Advisers as the backbone of the service, recognising their strong performance. While there was still some work to do on longer-term strategic infrastructure, the overall position was strong and well-managed.

- Were the roles of Personal Advisers temporary given that the number of care leavers was going to change or were the current numbers being maintained.

The Council currently had no temporary appointments for Personal Advisers as the existing staffing levels were considered appropriate for the foreseeable future. Although the number of care leavers was expected to peak, those young people would remain in the service for a long period, meaning staffing needs would stay relatively stable.

The turnover among this group of staff was low and no staffing challenges were anticipated. The Council also had a strong and developing offer for 16–18 year olds, especially around supported accommodation. If needed, staff could potentially be redeployed into that area in the future, but there were no current plans to do so. Overall, there were no concerns about staffing capacity.

- Whilst talking to young people down at The Journey discussion took place on how they accessed services. They suggested that having something like an app would make it much easier for them to navigate Council departments and contact the right people. Was this something the Council might consider developing in the future, especially in terms of improving access to health and other public services. Currently young people were already navigating the NHS app to access all their information, but accessing Council services may be a little harder in comparison.

Whilst the Council used messaging and other modern communication tools, these methods were not always reliable. Traditional telephone calls often remained the most effective way to reach young people.

Young people did have access to the NHS app and work was underway to improve how digital tools supported them. The Council was also continually reviewing how it interacted with Rotherham residents, including care leavers. Although digital engagement was being explored, there was currently no dedicated Council app for young people.

The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member believed this to be a good idea and suggested the Service Director Customer for Information and Digital Services be invited to a future meeting of the Corporate Parenting Partnership Board to look at future digital options.

In addition, perhaps it would add value to invite Julie Warren Sykes, ICB Representative, to the same meeting and extend an invitation to her when the Corporate Parenting Partnership Board Annual Report was presented to Scrutiny to answer some of the health-related questions.

- Paragraph 23 of the report referenced unregistered care homes so were these identified in Rotherham and overseen.

The national care placement market could not meet the complex needs of all children and young people, particularly those with high-level needs such as significant mental health issues, exploitation risks, frequent missing episodes etc. These young people often could not be placed in foster care or typical residential homes, especially when placements broke down and homes could only accept planned admissions.

As a result, Councils sometimes had to use unregistered provisions which were staffed homes not regulated by Ofsted. Quality varied and although these arrangements were not ideal, they were sometimes unavoidable. Rotherham typically had around five young people in such placements at any given time, usually for no longer

than a couple of weeks.

To ensure safety and accountability, commissioners would review each setting, social workers would visit weekly and senior managers would hold weekly oversight meetings. A monthly report tracked all young people in unregistered placements and progress in moving them on. Persistent cases received extra attention. This situation was common across Councils, and Ofsted, though unhappy with the existence of unregistered settings, acknowledged the reality. They were impressed with Rotherham's strong oversight and the safety of the young people involved.

Ofsted acknowledged that because the provision was unregistered, it technically did not meet the expected regulatory standard. However, due to the small number of children involved, Ofsted had reviewed all case files for those in unregistered placements. They were satisfied with what they found and the files showed strong oversight. In addition, the child's voice was clearly recorded with visits being documented appropriately.

Ofsted Inspectors met with the Head of Service who was overseeing the weekly review meetings, went through the processes in detail and were pleased with the outcomes. However, Ofsted did not visit the properties themselves as part of this review.

The Chair thanked all involved for the informative discussion.

Resolved:- (1) That the outcome of the inspection regarding the effectiveness of children's services in Rotherham and endorse the priorities identified for continued focus be noted.

(2) That consideration be given to inviting Julie Warren-Sykes, ICB Representative, to the 28th April, 2026 meeting of Improving Lives when the Corporate Parenting Partnership Board Annual Report 2024-2025 was presented.

(3) That the Corporate Parenting Partnership Board consider inviting the Service Director for Customer, Information and Digital Services to a future meeting to look at future digital options.

34. EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT UPDATE

Consideration was given to the report which provided a comprehensive overview of Education and Inclusion performance in Rotherham for the 2024/25 academic year. It built on the detailed Education Performance Outcomes briefing to present the information in a format tailored and highlighted where outcomes were improving and where concerted action was required. It framed performance through the lens of improving life chances, tackling inequalities (disadvantage, SEND and ethnicity) and strengthened inclusion across the system.

The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member introduced the report and highlighted how over the past year schools, early years settings and post-16 providers have been working hard to raise standards and support every child to succeed.

Encouraging improvements across key areas was continuing, including attainment and attendance and the progress made by most vulnerable learners was noted.

This report set out the challenges that remained and highlighted the focused work already underway to ensure that all learners, regardless of background or need, could thrive and reach their full potential.

The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member was also pleased to be attending a meeting of the Rotherham Education Partnership, where Head Teachers from across the borough would come together to share best practice and drive further improvements in attainment.

The Chair invited the Service Director for Education to deliver his presentation which covered:-

- Overview of:-
 - Educational Performance.
 - Key Successes and Challenges.
 - Focus on Inclusion and Equity.
 - Strategic Priorities and Collaboration.
- School Landscape and Governance.
- School and early years inspections (end of summer term 2025).
- Strengths.
- Areas of Focus.
- The Next Twelve Months.

The Chair invited questions from the Commission and a discussion and answer session from officers ensued with the following issues raised and clarified:-

- There was continued focus on disadvantaged and SEND gaps for gypsy and Roma outcomes so were these children being tracked.

The performance of all children were tracked including children who were identified as having disabilities.

- Detail on the Grade 4 mathematics outcome recognised that with academies this accountability sat mostly at a central level, but what specific work was being done to improve this benchmark, particularly because Grade 4 was key for pathways into apprenticeships, education, and employment. Was the gap compared with national

statistics influenced by staffing vacancies, and if so, was there anything the Council could do to help address or influence that work.

Communication had been established with the regional Maths Hubs identified by the DfE. After meeting with the local hub lead, it became clear that while primary schools engaged strongly, secondary engagement was much lower. To address this, secondary engagement with the Maths Hubs was made a focus area for the Rotherham Education and Strategic Partnership Board, working with attending leaders to encourage increased participation.

Evidence from the hubs showed that schools that engaged tended to improve their performance, so strengthening this link was a priority. In addition, the Council and ROSIS already bought in specialist maths support and exploration was taking place to better align and expand these resources to increase the amount of specialist time available to Rotherham schools.

Regular CPD sessions at the Rockingham Centre were also run, open to all schools and focused on improving maths teaching. Overall, the strategy involved boosting CPD, strengthening partnerships with maths hub providers and co-ordinating local maths expertise. The issue was not a shortage of maths teachers, but rather levels of engagement and support.

- Early years take-up in Rotherham had fluctuated since 2017–18, reaching a high of 89% but was currently sitting at 83%, which the report still described as a strong position. The national, regional, and statistical neighbour figures have all declined over the same period and were now lower than their starting point, unlike Rotherham's. The pandemic may explain some of the variation, but what was Rotherham doing differently in early education take-up that had allowed it to maintain comparatively higher performance and the reasons behind this trend?

The recent slight decline in nursery place take-up was partly due to the Government widening eligibility from three year-olds to two year-olds, which had made it more challenging to recruit families, though this was a national pattern.

Despite this, Rotherham had benefited from a very stable and experienced Head of Service and team, who have worked effectively with private, voluntary, and school-based nursery providers to maintain strong provision. Their strong relationships, communication, and sector knowledge attracted positive attention from the DfE, with officials visiting to learn from Rotherham's approach. At one point last year, the area was ranked sixth nationally for take-up of nursery places among disadvantaged families. Overall, this achievement was credited to experienced, trusted staff and long-standing partnerships with local nurseries.

The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member credited the Head of Service, who was recognised as an exceptional officer whose work had significantly strengthened early years support. For example a few years ago there were pupils in Years 10 and 11 who were disengaging from school because their needs had not been identified or met early enough. After researching other authorities, it was apparent the Council had strategies for childcare sufficiency and early years health, but no dedicated Early Years Education Strategy that picked up children's needs at the earliest possible point.

The Head of Service devised a standalone Early Years Education Strategy, which had been guiding the Council's work since. The Strategy had gained national recognition, being used by the Local Government Association as a case study and featured in First magazine.

The early adoption of this approach meant Rotherham was ahead of recent Government focus on the 0–5 age range. The success had also been supported by strong relationships with early years providers and the creativity and dedication of the team, particularly after the pandemic. To re-engage families who were reluctant to return to buildings, staff even visited communities dressed as Paw Patrol characters and used virtual tours to showcase settings. Overall, the work had created a much stronger, earlier system of identifying and supporting children and families.

- Reference was made to RISE and the performance figures in the report. Looking at those numbers were they about small percentages of pupils in every school across Rotherham who have reached those outcomes or was the data analysed at a school-by-school level. Perhaps by removing a small number of underperforming schools from the dataset would mean the overall average exceeded the national average? RISE would be focusing on the specific schools who were contributing most to lowering the overall figures.

Rotherham had access to exceptionally rich education data, more than many other Councils. Previously, the Council held this data internally and allowed schools to access it only if they paid a subscription. Starting from September 2025, a trial was taking place making this data freely available to all schools to support evidence-based improvement.

The Council was working to engage all schools using this shared data. However, independent academy trusts could be harder to involve as they have developed their own systems and operated more independently. Positive engagement efforts included the Cabinet Member writing to schools to congratulate them on strong Ofsted outcomes, which had helped build relationships.

The DfE had also begun recognising schools performing particularly well for pupils with disabilities, with local examples including Kimberworth and Wales Primary Schools.

The Council used data actively for performance discussions, modelling scenarios such as the impact of removing certain schools' results. This helped identify where local performance sat compared to national benchmarks and where individual schools significantly influenced overall outcomes.

- On the presentation slide for Strengths, there was no national average figure for the GLD SEND support, but for Rotherham it indicated it was 3% above the national average. What was the national average figure?

Details of the national average figure would be provided in writing after the meeting.

- Reference was made to the work on phonics in the ten schools with the lowest outcomes. It appeared the findings and improvements from those ten would then be shared more widely with schools that were just outside that group. For those schools not in the bottom ten would they still be supported as it appeared this would only happen after the initial work was completed with the ten identified schools. Was this correct when the work commenced in February, the arranging of a Spring Conference and then by summer the team expecting to be in a position to share and roll out what they have learned.

Barnsley, Sheffield and Rotherham were currently involved in the DfE project. Local authority maintained schools were included in the group of ten, particularly those in areas of high social deprivation, so they could share and apply learning with their peers.

Since September, the collaboration had been strengthened across Local Authority maintained schools by developing a shared memorandum of understanding, clarifying collective and individual decision-making. The schools were now meeting termly, sharing training and expertise and offered peer support between Head Teachers.

In addition, a Local Authority-led school improvement partner was working with all schools to support them and share learning. Insights gained would be shared across the group. Wider learning from the project would be developed with the DfE and used for national and local rollout through training and support for schools that needed it.

The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member highlighted the forthcoming all member seminar planned for March to help Elected Members understand how to engage more effectively with schools in their

wards through neighbourhood working. Martin Hughes and Paul Carney would be leading the session. Members were, therefore, encouraged to attend and then build active relationships with local schools.

Furthermore, it was particularly noted that recent DfE guidance recommended that primary schools should have a library, as some had lost dedicated reading spaces over time. Elected Members could support this through their Community Leadership Fund, capital funding, or other resources to help provide books and improve facilities.

Neighbourhood officers would assist Members after the seminar, which would also cover what would be involved in becoming a school governor. Overall, the aim of the seminar was to strengthen Member engagement with schools and help provide resources where needed.

- Looking again at the Early Years figures there was a drop last year across the board. It was reassuring that Rotherham's decline was around half of elsewhere, but to what extent was this linked to the increased eligibility and how was the ongoing work to expand capacity progressing?

The situation was driven by several factors, including the cost of living, changes in employment patterns creating greater demand for childcare and the expanded eligibility for Early Years places. The Early Years Team was responsible for ensuring there was sufficient childcare capacity across all wards and current reports to the DfE confirmed that capacity was adequate.

Capacity was monitored through annual sufficiency reports and termly census returns submitted to the DfE. The team worked closely with providers to address any gaps. This sometimes involved discussions with primary schools about offering places for younger children and with PVI providers about expanding baby and under-two provision.

Overall, managing sufficiency was a constant challenge and a significant ongoing area of work for the Early Years Team.

- Were there sufficient placements across the borough for those eligible for the traditional two-year places that were identified as particularly benefiting from that early education?

An example was provided on where Coleridge Primary School in Eastwood previously had a local-authority-run nursery, but numbers fell so low that it became unviable. With upcoming changes to early education entitlements and anticipated rising demand, discussions took place with the school's trust about taking over the provision.

After some time, the nursery was successfully re-established within the primary school, creating a strong early years offer that supported children as they moved into Reception and Year 1.

This was an example of the kind of negotiation and collaborative work needed to maintain sufficiency, especially during periods of change. Although there were initial concerns when the new entitlements were announced, there was now confidence that sufficient provision was in place, as reflected in the annual Childcare Sufficiency Report. However, while the Council had long reported on sufficiency, it previously lacked a dedicated Early Years Education Strategy. Given the increased Government focus on Early Years, this was now a priority area. Getting Early Years provision right was essential, as it supported children's engagement and outcomes throughout their later schooling.

- Could you elaborate more on the work involving gypsy/Roma communities.

A discussion with the regional RISE lead from the DfE explored potential projects for the Yorkshire and Humber region, highlighting the significant number of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children attending Ferham Primary. With end-of-year DfE funding available and Ferham already involved in RISE, it was agreed to develop a regional project.

The academy trust was approached and agreed to support the bid, enabling partnership work between local authority leads, gypsy, Roma and traveller community representatives, and the DfE. This collaboration had now led to the organisation of a major regional conference for all local authorities in Yorkshire and Humber, to be held in Leeds (venue currently being finalised).

The planned programme included a national keynote speaker, input from the DfE, and a national gypsy, Roma and traveller education lead. Delegates would take part in workshop sessions that would feed into a position paper focused on improving school inclusivity for gypsy, Roma and traveller children and narrowing the attainment gap. Inclusion leads and parent engagement leads from Rotherham and Sheffield schools would participate, helping shape practical recommendations for more supportive and welcoming school environments.

- What were the performance variation between high performing schools and those below average?

Several factors influenced school performance, but one of the most significant was the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals. Recent analysis shared with secondary Head Teachers showed no meaningful correlation between GCSE outcomes and the proportion

of pupils with SEND. However, there was a strong correlation between average GCSE grades and the percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals, indicating this status was the strongest predictor of attainment.

Importantly, some schools bucked this trend. Despite high levels of disadvantage, they still achieved above-average GCSE results. These schools typically demonstrated strong, stable leadership, a commitment to high-quality professional development, effective identification and intervention strategies and a strong ethos of belonging for all pupils.

These schools were also particularly good at recognising and removing “invisible barriers” associated with disadvantage. For example, avoiding practices that drew attention to poverty, being mindful of requirements like costly PE kits or access to home technology and ensuring expectations were equitable and inclusive.

While free school meal eligibility was the most influential factor, effective leadership, high-quality teaching, and an inclusive school culture could significantly mitigate its impact.

A programme was introduced to help schools become “attachment friendly,” recognising the importance of secure attachment between a child and a trusted adult. This approach was initially targeted where looked-after children were attending, but feedback from schools showed that the training benefited all pupils, not just those with care experience.

This highlighted the value of wider trauma-informed practice and the need for whole-school cultural change to support inclusion. Some schools, even in highly deprived areas with many languages spoken, demonstrated outstanding practice proving that inclusive, attachment-aware cultures were achievable. However, teachers were under significant pressure and often supported children dealing with complex social issues. When the Government eventually published its White Paper, it would be essential that schools were given the necessary resources to continue this work and deliver the inclusive, high-quality support their pupils needed.

Some of the most effective schools supported pupils by meeting basic needs and removing day-to-day barriers. This included providing free breakfast clubs, offering spare uniform at short notice, and ensuring no child was singled out due to poverty.

Broader work across the borough such as improving job opportunities through the Inclusive Economy Board and addressing housing quality also played a vital role, as secure housing and stable family income gave children a better start in life.

Within schools, the key drivers of success remained strong leadership, high-quality teaching and actively identifying and removing the “invisible barriers” that came with deprivation.

- Housing conditions and the home environment could also directly affect a young person’s ability to study, especially in more deprived areas. From experience there were not often places young people could have space to study, so the local library became essential for education. Was it recognised that where young people did not have a quiet place to study, were there any “homework hubs” to compensate for that gap particularly in deprived communities in say libraries. Could the extended hours at some libraries be used strategically to support those who needed a safe, quiet study space outside the home as there could be some links between poor housing conditions, limited study space at home, and the role of libraries as accessible, supportive learning environments.

This was considered a strong point. For example the library in Swinton had explored ideas like homework mentors and bringing in volunteers, but co-ordinating may be more of a challenge.

Through the family hubs programme stronger links were already being built. One of the original Government requirements for family hubs was to focus on improving the home learning environment for pre-school children. This had led to a lot of joint work with libraries including rhyme time sessions and activities that promoted learning through play.

This suggestion was worth exploring further, but it was about having a set of collective key messages that could be used when working with families. One of the things currently being explored was identifying four core messages that would help ensure very young children were as well prepared as possible for starting school.

These messages would be shared consistently by outreach and engagement workers, those running stay-and-play sessions, baby massage and by family support workers who were having conversations with families in their homes.

The focus was on promoting things like reducing screen time, increasing face-to-face interaction and highlighting the benefits of reading to children. Many working parents were not read to themselves, so reading aloud did not always come naturally. This linked well with library engagement as part of the Family Hub programme.

Beyond the Hub work, the Family Health Steering Group also had health colleagues around the table. Sharing these messages with health visitors could be reinforced during home visits so that it became a collective, consistent approach.

The aim was a small set of short, punchy messages that could be used across the whole partnership, to work with families in their homes and support early school readiness. The work was still very much in progress, but for now it was being shaped and prepared to embed across the workforce and wider partnership.

- Children were still within the education system that were impacted by the pandemic, the closures and the disruption so what real term impacts were being seen and how was data being interpreted based on how that impacted students.

There have been many reports on the potential impacts of the pandemic, but no definitive assessment. This was largely because it was impossible to draw clear comparisons between groups of children who did and did not experience lockdown. However, some impacts were very visible.

One of the clearest issues was that more children were starting school without being “school ready.” Schools were reporting higher numbers of children who were not toilet trained, who have delays in speech, language and communication, and who presented with emotional well-being and mental health difficulties. These trends were not unique to Rotherham they were being seen nationally.

More children were likely to be home educated. Until around two years ago, permanent exclusions were increasing year on year. After significant re-engagement work and nearly £1 million invested in behaviour outreach support, the numbers have been stabilised, although there was still much more work to do.

Academic progress was only now returning to pre-pandemic levels. Robust data showed the outcomes and it was clear the pandemic accelerated existing issues rather than creating new ones. For example, even before the pandemic, teachers were reporting children entering school without basic self-care skills, but these problems have become more widespread since.

To address this, investment has been put in to support hubs and direct work with families to improve school readiness. This was also why the Government’s statutory targets for a Good Level of Development have been strengthened along with the early years workforce, and looked to invest further in early years provision. Understanding children’s early development and curriculum experience before they arrived at school were essential.

Until last summer, all Rotherham’s early years providers were rated Outstanding. One childminder experienced a temporary issue that affected their Ofsted judgement, but this had now been resolved, although they would not be reinspected for some time. Work would

continue with all providers to ensure strong early years practice that supported children and families effectively.

A key part of driving improvement was understanding how the education system measured itself. Secondary schools judged progress by comparing GCSE outcomes with pupils' SATs results at age eleven. Similarly, primary schools measured progress from age seven and through assessments like the phonics check. By strengthening early-years and Key Stage 1 outcomes, a positive ripple effect could be created throughout the entire system.

Ultimately, the strategy was to intervene earlier, providing targeted support in early years and primary settings so that children achieved better outcomes at every stage. This helped schools track progress more positively and ensured children were better prepared academically, socially and emotionally as they moved through their education.

- There was a significant projected increase in GLD so what were the implications if the target was not met. The increase seemed quite large and was there likely to be a leap because of children not having that sort of lockdown experience.

The DfE had been contacted to clarify the consequences of not meeting the GLD target who confirmed that there would be no penalties for local authorities failing to reach the target up to at least 2028.

It was recognised that the required 9% uplift was based on aiming to move all areas towards the mid-70s nationally. This had caused frustration among high-performing authorities who already exceeded the national average as well as concern for areas like Rotherham, where the expected improvement represented a significant shift.

To respond to this challenge a two-strand approach was being taken:-

Improved Individual Child Tracking

- Strengthening progress-tracking systems for individual children.
- Working more closely with midwives and health services to align with the two-year check.
- Securing better data from private, voluntary, and independent nursery providers.
- Conducting research into outcomes for children who entered nursery at different ages, including those cared for at home until starting formal provision.
- Using data systems to identify which nurseries children attended, enabling targeted support for settings where outcomes were weaker.

Area-Level Targeting Based on Deprivation

- Collaborating with public health colleagues to analyse deprivation “heat maps”.
- Mapping the postcodes and wards of children who did not achieve GLD to identify geographical patterns.
- Developing plans to increase support and intervention in the most affected neighbourhoods, rather than focusing solely on individual cases across mixed-performance areas.

Overall, child-level insight was being combined with community-level targeting to make meaningful, data-driven improvements in early development outcomes.

After the pandemic, life still had not returned to “normal” for many families. What began as a cost-of-living crisis had lasted so long that it was now an ongoing, prolonged challenge. Rising inflation and everyday expenses continued to place significant pressure on households. As a result, activities that assumed access to devices like computers or tablets could be difficult for families who were already struggling. This long-term financial strain was an important factor to keep in mind.

The Chair thanked officers for their support and input.

Resolved:- (1) That the Education and Inclusion Annual Performance Report for 2024/2025 be received and the contents noted.

(2) That the areas for continued focus (phonics; KS2 reading/GPS; KS4 Attainment 8 and grade 5+; disadvantage and SEND gaps; Gypsy/Roma outcomes) be noted.

(3) That details of the national average figure be shared in relation to SEND Support achievement for a GLD which was 3% above.

(4) That consideration be given to how homework clubs in Libraries could be encouraged.

35. WORK PROGRAMME

The Chair drew attention to the Commission’s current Work Programme.

Currently a workshop was scheduled for 2 March, 2026 at 2:30 p.m. This session was intended to focus on support for vulnerable women in pregnancy, following the cessation of the PAUSE Project.

Due to the low attendance at the previous two workshops the Commission were asked to consider whether they preferred to receive a more detailed written briefing on this topic instead of attending a workshop. Feedback

could then be provided via email and picked up accordingly.

The Commission fully supported an off agenda briefing note and this would be prepared and circulated in due course.

Resolved:- That the Work Programme, with the revisions to the workshop as detailed above, be received and the contents noted.

36. IMPROVING LIVES SELECT COMMISSION - SUB AND PROJECT GROUP UPDATES

The Chair provided a progress report on sub and project group activity.

Consideration had been given to the Domestic Abuse and Sexual Offences/Abuse Strategy 2026–2029 as part of the pre-decision scrutiny process. This was undertaken by way of a dedicated workshop on Monday, 26th January, 2026 allowing for review, challenge and input into the proposed Cabinet decision before being presented for formal adoption.

The Select Commission welcomed the opportunity to scrutinise the Strategy refresh at an early stage and to consider in detail of the recommended review which reaffirmed the Strategy's vision and a streamlining of previous priorities. It was clear this enabled a more focused driven, co-ordinated and effective response to key areas of need.

Taking into account the key aims and the partnership action plan the Strategy should provide a consistent, survivor and family centred approach to tackling Domestic Abuse and Sexual Offences/Abuse, including tackling violence against women and girls.

The following recommendations were made by Members who participated in the workshop:-

- That the Strategy was clear in its inclusivity of all those at risk of Domestic Abuse throughout.
- To ensure the capture of reporting and victim data were included.
- A specific identification of "more vulnerable" people when there was a risk to the public.
- The colour scheme used in the Strategy made sections difficult to read and perhaps could be improved to enhance accessibility and clarity.
- Consideration of the language used on the title page to ensure it was clear and appropriate.

In addition there was also a Joint Workshop on Threshold of Need Document and RPCF Impact Report 2024/2025 with visit to Eric Manns Building

This was undertaken by way of a dedicated workshop on Thursday, 29th January, 2026 and hosted by the Rotherham Parent Carers Forum in

the Eric Manns Building.

The aim of the session was to share details of the Threshold of Needs Document that relates to the SEND Sufficiency Strategy which was about ensuring good quality school places for children with SEND.

In addition, Jayne Fitzgerald and other officers shared detail on last year's impact report 2024/2025 and provided a brief outline of next steps following the opening up of groups and workshops.

This report celebrated the milestones achieved and shared stories, experiences and evidence of the difference that partnership and living experience could make.

Rotherham Parent Carers Forum were committed to making Rotherham a better place for families of children and young people with SEND and Neurodivergent people across Rotherham.

Members that did attend welcomed the excellent information that was shared. A copy of the presentation that was delivered would be circulated to Members of Improving Lives along with a link to the website to allow Members to sign up for the newsletter.

Resolved:- That the update be noted.

37. URGENT BUSINESS

There was no urgent business.