

21 November 2016

Director of Children and Young People's Services  
Rotherham Borough Council  
Riverside House  
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Rotherham  
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Dear Ian

### **Monitoring visit of Rotherham Borough Council children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit of Rotherham Borough Council children's services on 20 and 21 of October 2016. The visit was the first monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate for overall effectiveness in October 2014. Inspectors have, however, undertaken four improvement visits between 2015 and 2016. This monitoring visit was carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectors Tracey Metcalfe and Graham Reiter. While progress to improve services for children looked after has been slower than has been seen in other areas across children's services, there is clear evidence of improvement in some key areas. These include: strategic management, vision and planning, performance management and quality assurance arrangements, service restructure, recruitment and retention and compliance with statutory requirements.

### **Areas covered by the visit**

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in respect of the experience and progress of children looked after, with a particular focus on five important themes:

- strategic and operational management oversight
- the quality of children's experiences
- the quality of assessment and care planning
- the timeliness of decisions when children need permanence
- the effectiveness of the review process.

Inspectors also considered:

- placement commissioning and sufficiency
- the arrangements in place to respond to children missing from care.

The visit considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, supervision files and notes, observation of social workers undertaking assessments, and other information provided by staff and managers. In addition, inspectors spoke to children from the Children in Care Council, foster carers and a range of staff, including managers, independent reviewing officers (IROs) and other practitioners.

## **Summary of findings**

- The council has continued to respond positively to the recommendations identified following the single inspection in 2014. A stable senior management team, led by the director of children's services (DCS), demonstrates determined, effective, strategic leadership with clear priorities and aspirations, and a sustained focus on improving outcomes for children.
- Performance management and quality assurance arrangements are robust and support senior managers to identify where progress is being made and where improvement is required. Reliable data shows improved compliance in meeting some statutory requirements, with particular regard to statutory visits and the timeliness of children's reviews.
- Improvement is evident in relation to compliance with statutory requirements. Social worker caseloads have reduced, providing more time for focus on individual children. However, frontline management oversight of social work practice is weak. Social workers are neither supported nor challenged sufficiently by managers to improve the quality of their work.
- When children become looked after, their needs are not formally reassessed, and ongoing risk and need are not always recognised or supported well enough. This includes cases from a very small sample during this visit where children are at risk of child sexual exploitation.
- Children who require permanence are not identified soon enough. The Public Law Outline (PLO) is not being used effectively. Consequently, some children are experiencing delay in securing legal permanence. Supervised contact arrangements are insufficiently resourced and planning is poor. There is little evidence that children receive support to help them to understand why they have become looked after and what is going to happen to them.
- A recent reduction in the use of agency social workers and managers is resulting in a more stable and permanent workforce. However, children have experienced too many changes of social worker, which has had a negative impact on their plans being progressed in a timely way.
- There has been an improvement in the timeliness of children's reviews, and in the scrutiny and challenge of IROs. This is not yet leading to improvement in the quality of children's plans, nor is it driving progress.

- While there has been an improvement in the timeliness of children's annual health assessments, practice in relation to initial health assessments remains poor.
- The number of children who become looked after have continued to rise as the council's focus on children in need of help and protection has improved. This is placing significant pressure on the council's ability to identify and match children to the right placement in a timely way. Placement stability has deteriorated and the number of placement disruptions are increasing. However, children who spoke to inspectors say that they feel safe in their placements and in school, and receive good support from their social workers and carers.
- The number of children who go missing from care has reduced significantly in the last six months and an increased number of children receive a return home interview. However, this is not the case for children who live out of borough.

### **Evaluation of progress**

The DCS is highly visible and accessible. A more stable senior leadership team demonstrates a strong focus on performance management. Senior managers have undertaken an honest and robust self-assessment of the service they provide to children looked after and have sought external peer scrutiny and challenge from children and young people in Rotherham. The result is that they know themselves well. The DCS has a clear vision and understanding of the key priorities to improve the experience and progress of children looked after. There is evidence of the council's direct engagement with children from the Children in Care Council who have told inspectors they feel valued and involved in developing their own plans and contributing to service developments.

The council has taken effective action to begin to address the significant shortfalls identified in the single inspection undertaken in October 2014. A strong focus on performance management is beginning to show improvement in compliance with some statutory requirements. Children are being seen regularly by a social worker and there has been positive improvement in the timeliness of reviews. Improved partnerships with the virtual school have seen an increase in the number of personal education plans being completed, although it is recognised that there is much work to do to improve the quality and the aspiration for children. Improved relationships with health partners have resulted in children looked after being prioritised for assessment and intervention from children and adolescent mental health services. The number of annual health assessments completed in a timely way have improved, as have the number of dental checks. Initial health assessment performance remains poor.

Inspectors found evidence that key priorities to secure a stable and permanent workforce have been translated well through strategic planning and actions. The

success of the workforce strategy is demonstrated through the significant reduction in the reliance on agency social workers and managers to 18%. This improvement is very recent and, while positive, is not yet providing all children with an opportunity to develop a trusting relationship with their social worker. In recent months, children have experienced a number of changes in social workers and their managers, which has had a negative impact on the timely progression of children's assessments and plans.

Senior managers have set very high expectations of their social workers and managers in terms of performance and quality standards. Caseloads have been reduced to an average of below 15 children in the looked after children's service, to enable social workers to focus on the quality of their work with children, and there has been an increase in IRO capacity to empower this function. A deep dive into audit findings is beginning to support and challenge social workers when children's plans are not progressing within a child's own timescale. Despite these changes, the quality of some social work practice remains poor. When children become looked after, there is a lack of urgency to identify their long-term needs and secure early permanence. Senior managers have begun to track those children subject to voluntary arrangements and, while this is beginning to drive some children's plans forward, too many continue to experience delay in securing legal permanence.

New appointments support the renewed focus on the Public Law Outline (PLO). A new permanent full-time PLO case manager and PLO panel chair are in place. An additional social work team has been created to progress care proceedings. However, the PLO process is still not being used effectively. There are delays in assessments being undertaken before care proceedings are issued and some delays in proceedings being issued once interim care applications have been sent to legal services. Family members are not identified or assessed early enough when children become looked after, which does not support children in developing a sense of security within their family. When children return home to parents, assessments and support to ensure that the decision is safe are not robust. Contact arrangements between children and their parents are not sufficiently risk assessed or reviewed. Resource to ensure that children experience good-quality family contact is insufficient and some venues used currently for contact are inappropriate. Senior managers are aware of this shortfall and plans are in place to review the service.

Children do not routinely receive an updated assessment of their holistic needs, thus their care plans do not focus well enough on the outcomes to be achieved. Risk and need are not robustly explored or understood.

When child protection concerns arise, procedures are not always followed. Strategy meetings still do not routinely follow 'Working Together 2015' guidance. Screening tools to explore child sexual exploitation concerns are not being completed correctly in all cases when a child may be at risk, despite previous improvement visits identifying more robust practice in this area. While the numbers of children going

missing from their placement have reduced significantly, not all children who are placed out of the borough receive a return home interview.

There continue to be gaps and inaccurate recording of children's key information, making it difficult to understand a child's journey or measure progress. There is a lack of evidence of direct intervention or life story work to help children understand why they have become looked after or what is going to happen in the future. Senior managers have taken decisive action to address these shortfalls. Robust audits of casework are undertaken routinely as well as more specifically to explore a particular issue. Frontline team management capacity has been enhanced, with some permanent recent appointments across the children looked after service. A coaching and mentoring programme for team managers is in place, with a local authority practice partner and there are plans to extend this support to social workers from November 2016. There is some evidence that managers are beginning to deliver more regular supervision. However, this is still without the rigour, challenge and reflection required to support social workers to improve the quality of their practice and focus on improving timely outcomes for children.

IROs are an emerging strength. Capacity has been increased in the IRO service, with caseloads below that recommended in the IRO handbook. The timeliness of children's reviews has increased, and evidence shows increased IRO scrutiny and challenge. This is beginning to identify when progress is needed in some children's plans, but is yet to demonstrate how improved scrutiny is making a difference to outcomes for children.

The council has a clear determination to provide the best possible provision for children looked after. The increased pressure on placements is partly attributable to the increase in numbers of children looked after. Long- and short-term placement stability has deteriorated. A lack of local placement provision means children with complex needs are more likely to be placed more than 20 miles from their home. Children are not matched well to placements. Placement decisions are too reactive to crisis situations and too often made without children's needs being fully explored or understood. Despite these challenges, children who spoke with inspectors did feel safe in their placements and valued the relationship with their social workers.

Senior managers acknowledge the insufficiency of placements available to children in house, particularly those children with complex and more challenging needs. Senior managers have taken appropriate steps to decommission the majority of in-house residential placements, as these were not meeting the quality standard required. A number of new and innovative commissioning approaches are being developed. The council is involved in the development of a local and regional framework to influence and drive improvements in the quality of independent placements. The in-house fostering offer is strengthened and is beginning to improve placement choice and capacity, with better incentives for carers with the skills to support adolescents, as well as out of hours support and respite for foster carers of children with a disability.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely,

Tracey Metcalfe

**Her Majesty's Inspector**