

Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council

Leaving Care Peer Challenge

12th to 15th March 2024

Feedback Report

1.Executive Summary

Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council's social care services for children and young people were judged to be "good" following an ILACS inspection undertaken by Ofsted and published in 2022.

This peer challenge, at the request of the council, has focused on young people in care and care leavers aged 16 to 24. At the commencement of the peer challenge the Council had 500 children and young people (aged 0-17) that are looked after by the council and 351 care leavers (aged 18-24), including unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people.

The commitment of senior leaders and staff in children's services and local health and accommodation services was clear, with high levels of passion and determination to meet the needs and improve outcomes for care leavers. The peer team were able to identify examples of services making a real difference to the lived experience of care leavers. Performance measured against national indicators was generally high although the quality and consistency of pathways plans was variable.

There is a recognition that there is limited availability of suitable placements for older young people and care leavers within the local area. Consequently, they have to be placed in other council areas and post 18 remain outside the borough. This is reflected in the council's sufficiency strategy, but further work is required to develop the range of accommodation services needed for care leavers. The peer team have recommended a separate leaving care strategy as well as updating the existing sufficiency strategy with clearer focus on care leavers with an implementation plan to help achieve this.

Rotherham has a comprehensive local offer for care leavers but there are areas for improvement particularly regarding the health support post 19 which does not provide a dedicated health offer for care leavers similar to that which it provides to children and young people in care. The local offer is under review and would benefit from being coproduced with young people in care and care leavers to better reflect their wishes and views.

2.Key Recommendations

There are a range of observations and suggestions within the report which the peer team hope will offer practical actions for the council in addition to the conversations which took place during the week on site. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council and its partners.

1. Dedicated leaving care strategy and updated sufficiency strategy to be developed. The peer team believe that the Council and its partners would benefit from having a dedicated leaving care strategy and sufficiency strategy setting out how the specific needs of this cohort will be catered for. This will help support the clear ambition for care leavers and drive progress.

2. Business and needs analysis to drive and shape care leavers strategy with SMART implementation plan. The leaving care strategy should be based on a detailed needs analysis and include an implementation plan which includes the views and wishes of care leavers and has been agreed with other departments of the council such as housing as well as partners where appropriate.

3. Project management resource to support care leaver service to develop and deliver strategy. Peers felt that having a dedicated project management resource to assist with implementation and monitoring of the leaving care strategy would ensure schemes can be delivered in a timely manner particularly those involving additional building and capital investment.

4. Review the current structure to determine the merits of having a dedicated 16 plus service for young people in care and care leavers including UASC. To enable the council to drive and develop the range of services it wishes to have within the borough the relative merits of having a dedicated 16 plus service will need to be determined.

5. Assess the need for additional capacity for 16 plus service. Determine if there is a business case for additional personal advisers and service manager capacity to enable the earlier allocation of personal advisers at 16 and to manage the range of services likely to be required.

6. In line with the vision, expedite the allocation of personal advisers at the age of 16 to commence work with young people at the earliest opportunity. This will better support and enable effective access to education, employment and training, financial planning, and accommodation prior to and following their 18th birthday.

7. Personal advisers to be provided with specific training on their role including how to develop high quality and meaningful pathway plans which are updated with the changing needs of the care leavers. To help sustain consistent quality and maintain practice standards of pathway plans personal advisers would benefit from being offered dedicated training and development to ensure they have a good understanding of what is expected of them and what a good plan should include.

8. Based on an evaluated needs assessment, additional supported housing and individual accommodation options should be provided in Rotherham to meet the needs of local young people and care leavers, including UASC. The council is committed to keeping its young people and care leavers within the borough but currently does not have sufficient accommodation provision and range of options available to do so and offer placement choice. A more detailed needs and costed options analysis will assist in determining the range of provision and priorities.

9. Joint accommodation working group to be established to determine level of need and medium-term implementation and investment plan. Children's social care services will need to work corporately across council services and include housing, planning and financial services and its partners to be able to develop the range of provision which is likely to be required.

10. A more impactful approach to coproduction with this group of young people to be introduced and facilitated where the voice of care leavers is visible in all service, policy, and practice developments. Incorporating the wishes and views of young people and care leavers in all service, policy and practice reviews is likely to ensure that the leaving care offer better reflects what they feel will work best for them and cater for their needs.

11. Include the development of a separate care leavers forum supported by a dedicated participation resource. To help facilitate the effective engagement of care leavers it will be necessary to have a more dedicated participation resource in place to support regular meetings, events, and use of social media.

12. Consider the development of an integrated performance data dashboard which aggregates a range of education, social care and health information etc. to help inform planning and scrutiny. Whilst there is a good range of performance data available the creation of an integrated strategic performance dashboard which aggregates the full range of child and young people level data available would help managers and service commissioners with planning services and monitoring performance. UASC data should be shown as a subset of the main performance data to help with clarifying their specialist needs.

13. Review senior membership of the new Corporate Parenting Partnership Board. The new Corporate Parenting Partnership Board which is due to come into place would benefit from having a broader membership including improved representation from senior leaders in education, health, and housing to help drive the desired service improvements.

3.Summary of Peer Challenge Approach

The fundamental aim of a peer challenge is to help councils and their partners reflect on provision in their local area and what improvements can be made. It is important to remember that the peer challenge is not an inspection; it provides a critical friend approach to challenge the council in assessing its strengths and helping to identify areas for development. The approach has included reviewing the documentation and data provided by the council, reviewing a sample of cases open to the leaving care service prior to the team's arrival on site and during the onsite phase. This involved a review of pathway plan needs assessments, pathway plans and the case record. Peers held meetings with a broad range of senior leaders, managers, and practitioners from within social care, education and health services, foster carers, and unaccompanied asylum seekers and care leavers. It is important to recognise that the findings are based on a range of evidence-based activity and the peer challenge reflects what the peer team read, observed, and heard.

Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council and its partners are encouraged to reflect on what the findings mean in relation to the local area. They will need to determine how foster carers, education, training and housing providers, parents and carers and young people can be further involved in the improvement work identified during the peer challenge.

4.The Peer Team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced senior officers. The selection and make-up of the peer team reflects the focus of the peer challenge. Peers were identified based on their relevant experience and expertise and their participation was agreed in advance with the council.

The peers who delivered the peer challenge for Rotherham were:

- **Lead Peer** – Catherine Mc Evoy-Carr, Director of Children’s Services, Newcastle City Council.
- **Health Peer** – Penny Earney, LGA Associate.
- **Housing Peer** – Katri Wilson, Assistant Director Housing Operations, London Borough of Havering.
- **Off-site EHCP Review Peers** – Amanda Checkley and Jane Ash LGA Associates.
- **Peer Challenge Manager** – Cliff James, LGA Associate.
- **Shadow Peer Challenge Manager** – Peter Wood, LGA Associate.

5.Peer Challenge Process

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of strategic and performance documents and data, including a self assessment, to ensure they had a good grasp of the challenges facing the council. Two offsite peers reviewed 16 young people and care leavers open to the children in care and leaving care service aged 16 to 24. A report of their findings was shared with the council in advance of the peer team arriving on site and the findings discussed with senior managers during the on-site phase.

The peer team then spent four days onsite, based at Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council’s main office at Riverside House, Rotherham. During the onsite phase the peers:

- Met in excess of 70 practitioners, managers and partners.
- Visited the Hollowgate 16 plus supported housing service and The Journey the leaving care hub at Chatham Villas.
- Participated in focus groups with foster carers, education leads, practitioners, and managers.
- Met with partners representing health, housing, police, DWP and probation.
- Reviewed a further 4 cases allocated to social workers and 4 cases allocated to personal advisers.
- Met with 3 care leavers and 8 unaccompanied asylum seekers.
- Collectively the team spent more than 300 hours determining findings.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. It builds on the presentation provided by the peer team on the 15th March 2024.

By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time and needs to be viewed in this context.

6.Scope and Focus of the Peer Challenge

In advance of the peer team arriving on-site, Rotherham identified six key lines of enquiry they wanted the team to focus on. In addition to this all LGA peers have commented on leadership and governance which is standard practice for all LGA peer challenges.

Key lines of enquiry:

- Leadership and Governance
- Do our care leavers have timely and robust pathway plans, which support their transition to adulthood and meet their needs and does this process start at an early enough stage?
- Do our unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people have bespoke plans for their needs?
- Do our accommodation options meet the needs of our care leavers, enabling them to transition successfully to adulthood?
- Do we support care leavers to have successful and long-lasting relationships with family and connected people?
- Is our draft Local Offer ambitious enough for our Care Leavers and does it support them to have access to quality education or training and employment opportunities?
- Are leaders as corporate parents tackling disparities in the physical and mental-health outcomes of care leavers and are they able to access help when they need it?

7.Main findings

7.1 Leadership and governance

Senior leaders demonstrate clear evidence of ambition and aspiration for children's services in Rotherham and have a good overall understanding of the improvement challenges they are facing and are addressing issues openly. There is visible commitment from senior leaders, managers and front facing practitioners to deliver improved outcomes for young people and care leavers. Rotherham has a skilled and dedicated practitioner workforce who like working for the council and feel professionally fulfilled and supported by their managers. Peers found however that there is sometimes a disconnect between the council's strategic vision and implementation of it at an operational level.

There is strong evidence of political oversight and leadership with the lead member playing an active role both locally and nationally and offering experience and insight of the key issues impacting on services to children in care and care leavers. Peers identified confidence in the member officer interface. Political commitment was evident in the desire to deliver good outcomes for the children of Rotherham e.g., cabinet supporting additional investment in new services including improvements in the foster care offer, additional investment in new children's homes and supported accommodation placements for care leavers.

The peer team could not see evidence that the Corporate Parenting Panel is currently driving service improvement and would benefit from having a broader membership involving key stakeholders able to commit to service improvement. The need to refocus the Corporate Parenting Panel has been recognised by senior leaders and plans are being developed to establish a Corporate Parenting Partnership Board.

Rotherham's Corporate Parenting Strategy 2024/27 sets out the council's vision and promises to children in care and care leavers. South Yorkshire Integrated Care Board's (ICB) draft strategy for looked after children and care leavers 2023/28 sets out its vision for physical and mental health support. It acknowledges the need for specialist health provision to be commissioned for care experienced young adults up to age of 25 years, including UASC, SEND, and those within the justice system, as to date the provision only extends to a care leavers 19th birthday.

The corporate parenting and sufficiency strategies and leaving care action plan would benefit from being based on a detailed analysis of the needs of children and young people and care leavers in Rotherham. This combined with a SMART implementation plan would lead to more comprehensive service improvement.

Co-production with care leavers and including their views and aspirations is underdeveloped in strategic service plans and the leaving care offer. Supporting care leavers to actively engage with service commissioners and providers will enhance the quality of service plans, policies and the service offer. The peer team felt the plethora of feedback such as those from services like Hollowgate could be better used.

The peer team were able to identify that the joint ICB/RMBC Assistant Director post is supporting effective partnership working and joint commissioning between health and council services. This approach should help to improve timely pathways for agreed joint funding for accommodation and care packages for care leavers transitioning into adult services with complex needs.

There is strong partnership working with South Yorkshire Police and within the local criminal justice system with evidence of criminal mapping and targeted prevention and intervention services in place and effective contextual safeguarding to support children and young people at risk and care leavers.

Performance against national and regional indicators is high for children in care and care leavers in Rotherham with high levels of care leavers in suitable accommodation at 95.5% and accessing education, training and employment at

72.4%. The comprehensive range of performance data is not, however, fully utilised in a way that could better inform strategic planning for a range of health and accommodation services.

7.2 Do our care leavers have timely and robust pathway plans, which support their transition to adulthood and meet their needs and does this process start at an early enough stage?

Social workers and personal advisers are highly motivated, know their young people and care leavers well and are committed to achieving improved outcomes for them. Care leavers told peers that they greatly value the support they receive from their social workers and personal advisers who have manageable caseloads to support best practice. There is strong evidence of joint working at an operational level with partners to safeguard young people and care leavers and meeting their needs.

Despite the ambition to allocate personal advisers early there remains a high number of cases being allocated three months prior to a young person reaching their 18th birthday which does not support effective transition planning and is not yet in line with the council's ambition. Health information provided at 17 as a Health Passport is not being recorded to inform pathway planning in a timely way.

There is good evidence of a strong collaborative focus between adult and children's social care services which is supporting transition pathways for those young people who meet adult services criteria.

Rotherham's "Signs of Safety" practice model was clearly evidenced in pathway plans and case recording and is understood by social workers. The scoring system used is helpful and reflects engagement with young people. This is not the case for personal advisers. Pathways plans tend to be formulaic and are not always valued by care leavers and personal advisers or updated in response to a change in circumstances. They lack specific detail on the pathway needed to achieve aspirations. There is also a lack of evidence of life story work being undertaken, in particular in relation to UASC.

The peer team felt there is insufficient regular training and staff development available regarding leaving care practice to help model what a "good" plan is and how pathway plans should be updated and developed over time.

7.3 Do our unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people have bespoke plans for their needs?

The Journey (Rotherham's leaving care service hub) offers an accessible community based one stop shop and good support to unaccompanied asylum seekers (UASC). There is a good understanding of the cultural, social and religious needs of UASC and UASC care leavers and significant efforts are being made by social workers and

personal advisers to meet these. There are good links with the Refugee Council who visit the hub monthly.

Currently there is insufficient capacity for personal advisers to engage with young people in care at an earlier stage. There is also a recognised lack of expertise to gain an understanding of the history and lived experience of UASC prior to their arrival in the UK and benefits are likely to be gained in addressing this issue.

The virtual school is actively supporting the needs of UASC with additional English teaching being provided and laptops made available for them to use. The local further education college offer to UASC is strong and they are provided with ready access to ESOL and more advanced courses when able and ready to do so.

The ICB has commissioned extended initial health assessments in recognition of the complexity of UASC health needs and to assist with the needs for translation and screening to ensure correct health information is being shared to inform transition planning. Health care plan details are not, however, being routinely used to inform pathway planning.

UASC are frequently placed outside of the borough, and they tend to remain in those areas post 18 which can create issues for them when needing to access the range of support services they require from the council and its partners.

Including UASC performance data as a subset of data on the main performance dashboard will assist with future planning for this group and help distinguish performance and needs of these young people and UASC care leavers from those who originate from the local area.

7.4 Do our accommodation options meet the needs of our care leavers, enabling them to transition successfully to adulthood?

Accommodation and placement resources within Rotherham are limited resulting in not insignificant numbers of young people and care leavers including UASC being placed in Sheffield or further afield due to a lack of sufficient placements and housing options in the local area.

There is evidence of increased joint planning with housing colleagues which has led to 10 properties being offered to meet the needs of some young people and care leavers. Care leavers are also given priority 1 access to housing to facilitate independence and the revised allocation banding system is shortly due to change and will offer care leavers further enhanced priority access to housing provision as it becomes available. The number of HMOs used by care leavers has increased and residents are supported to sustain their tenancy.

Hollowgate is an impressive and crucial resource provided by the council and offers comprehensive semi-independent support to prepare young people under 18 for independence. This is well used and highly regarded by the young people staying there and by practitioners. The capacity within Hollowgate is however stretched due to staff vacancies which may impact on the support offer to care leavers.

There has been an increase in in-house foster carers due to a targeted recruitment process over the last year and consistent use is being made of staying put which is a very positive offer for care leavers.

There remains a need to further develop the stock and range of accommodation required to adequately cater for care leavers and reduce the dependence on expensive private housing provision. A more detailed analysis is required to inform the business case and strategy for care leavers to better determine housing needs and the best options for provision. The capital investment programme would benefit from such a needs analysis which is likely to better facilitate care leavers to remain in Rotherham. There are insufficient outcome measures to fully understand the success and effectiveness of providing supported housing and these will need to be developed and put in place. This needs to be undertaken with housing and commissioning colleagues and providers and informed by the wishes and views of young people and care leavers.

Staying close has not been rolled out due to lack of funding from DfE but opportunities need to be considered about how the model might be developed to enable staff in children's homes and supported accommodation to continue to support care leavers post 18.

7.5 Do we support care leavers to have successful and long-lasting relationships with family and connected people?

“Staying Put” with in-house and independent fostering agency foster carers is well developed in Rotherham with over 50 care leavers in staying put placements. Foster carers are committed to offering practical and emotional support to the young people they look after whilst in placement and after they have moved on from living with them. Some carers reported that there may be a reluctance to offer staying put placements due to the financial implications. The council may wish to explore this issue further with carers. Not all personal advisers maintain ongoing contact with staying put foster carers post 18 and this was identified as a challenge for some foster carers. Foster carers also felt there were limited opportunities to celebrate success for them and the young people they look after particularly post Covid.

Consideration could be given to supporting some special guardianship carers with a post 18 support package to encourage take up particularly where orders are made for older young people.

There is an ambition to ensure care leavers understand and use their support networks including birth family and friendships. The new Support to Change Team is running a pilot Caring Connections for 16- to 18-year-olds transitioning to independence and targeting isolation and building non biological supportive networks prior to a young person leaving care. This is based on some of the principles of the “Lifelong Links” and builds on the FGC offer for Care Leavers

Personal advisers regularly visit care leavers and support links with the birth family where appropriate. Pathway plans do not however always focus on a young person's

networks and how this will support long lasting relationships. Potential opportunities for reunification and greater contact with birth family would benefit from having a greater focus to be successful e.g. family network meetings and a dedicated resource to explore what support would be required to enable reunification to be successful and endure and avoid an unplanned drift back to birth family which can often happen.

There remain a high number of children placed in independent foster placements and peers were advised that there is a plan to recruit an additional 20 foster carers during 2024/25, equal to the target gained in 23/24. Greater inhouse recruitment will hopefully add to the stock of carers willing to offer staying put placements.

7.6 Is our draft Local Offer ambitious enough for our Care Leavers and does it support them to have access to quality education or training and employment opportunities?

Rotherham's current local leaving care offer provides a good range of support and opportunities to its care leavers e.g. priority access to accommodation, financial support and setting up home allowance, help to access education, training and employment, leisure services and driving lessons.

The pathway and personal development toolkit for care leavers is in place and is being well used by care leavers who are supported to identify areas of strengths where they need additional help in developing their independence skills.

The council is in the process of reviewing the local offer and there is a recognition that the accessibility and content of the offer needs to be improved and better communicated to young people and care leavers, including the clarification and revision of the health offer post 18 years. The voice of care leavers does not obviously feature in the local offer and there is limited evidence of coproduction to date. The offer would be strengthened by being able to demonstrate how care leavers have helped to shape it. Additional staffing capacity to support the active participation and engagement of care leavers would, via the Care Leavers' Forum, help achieve this.

Joint working arrangements with specialist officers at the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) and leaving care team are well developed and target those young people who need support to access employment or further education and training.

The virtual school is having a beneficial impact in Rotherham and members of the virtual school team attend personal education plan meetings to support the allocated social worker and schools and colleges. There is a dedicated post 16 specialist in the team. However, services available to support access to education, employment and training are not however evaluated to determine impact and ongoing engagement by care leavers.

The low numbers of young people in higher education are not fully understood and would benefit from further exploration to help achieve a level which is more consistent with statistical neighbours and the national average.

7.7 Are leaders as corporate parents tackling disparities in the physical and mental-health outcomes of care leavers and are they able to access help when they need it?

Rotherham's inhouse therapeutic service is valued by staff and foster carers and quickly responds to issues when they arise.

There are appropriate health services being commissioned to support the physical and mental health needs of children in care and during the first year after they reach 18 however dedicated health services are not currently continuing or being separately commissioned to work with care leavers post 19. Health drop-ins at the Journey leaving care hub are not yet happening. Delays in assessment and funding decisions can lead to uncertainty of post 18 care packages.

Following successful implementation of the dental focus SMILE pilot, care leavers now have access to a dentist. Creative commissioning arrangements for sexual health, drug and substance misuse services providing timely access and appropriate support are in place. The Young Parents Team offers timely support for care leavers up to age 25 who are pregnant and/or become parents.

The Integrated Care Board representation on Corporate Parenting Panel has been inconsistent, and this appears to have impacted on the awareness and implementation of some health initiatives for care leavers. Data collection around impact measures insufficient and Health outcomes for care leavers are not fully understood by the local integrated health system. There is a recognition from health colleagues that the leaving care health offer requires revision. The terms of reference for the joint ICB/RMBC Looked After children and Care Experience Young People Physical and Emotional Health workstream were finalised and ratified in December 2023 with acknowledgement by senior leads for the need of this workstream to be expedited. The articulation of the physical and mental health offer and its effectiveness, needs to be strengthened and developed.

8.Next Steps

Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council and its partners are encouraged to reflect on what these findings mean in relation to the local area. They along with accommodation and housing providers, education and training providers, parents and carers, young people and care leavers can be further involved in the improvement work relating to the findings of the peer challenge. The council will also want to provide feedback to individuals who have contributed to this peer challenge.

The Local Government Association would be happy to discuss how we could help you further, please contact Richard Cooke, Head of children's services improvement (richard.cooke@local.gov.uk).

Thank you to everyone involved for their participation in this peer challenge. Please pass on thanks from the peer challenge team to Michelle Hill for her help and assistance prior to the peer challenge and during the on-site phase.