

Inspection of Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 3 to 7 November 2025

Lead inspector: Catherine Heron, His Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of children in care	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

Since the last inspection in 2022, services for children, young people and families in Rotherham have improved further, driven by a confident leadership team with strong corporate and political backing. This united commitment has placed children's experiences and their voices at the heart of strategic improvement. Progress is evident across all areas of social work practice.

Children in need of help and protection, and those in care, now benefit from an outstanding service delivered by a stable, highly skilled workforce. Practitioners know their children well, advocate fiercely for them, and build relationships that promote safety and belonging. Further investment in the early help and family help model is enabling more children to remain safely within their family networks with timely, targeted support that is making a measurable difference to their lives.

Senior leaders' ambition for their care leavers has grown significantly. Decisive action has been taken to strengthen pathway planning, embed relational support, and promote opportunities for safe independence when care leavers are ready. While some variability remains, the leadership team is actively addressing this, ensuring

that every young person is well prepared and supported for adulthood and where every decision is made with their futures in mind.

What needs to improve?¹

- The quality of pathway plans for care leavers. (Outcome 4, national framework)
- The quality of health history information provided to care leavers. (Outcome 4, national framework)

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: outstanding

1. Children requiring help and protection benefit from a wide range of services delivered through well-established and well-coordinated family help hubs. These hubs provide a continuum of support from pregnancy, through adolescence and beyond, ensuring that children and their families receive timely, targeted early help to prevent escalation of risk and need. The rapid allocation of early help workers is providing swift interventions and support where it is needed. Assessments are thorough, child focused and grounded in the experiences and voices of children and families. Creative early help workers build on the strengths of families, helping to increase their resilience, recognising parents and carers' natural talents and positive attributes. Workers connect families and their network to services at the earliest opportunity, leading to co-produced plans that reflect family goals.
2. When children's needs change and risk increases, effective relationships between family help hubs and statutory services ensure that children receive the right services at the right time. Family help workers and social workers support the child and family to understand what is happening and navigate the next steps. When it is safe to step down from statutory services, this happens thoughtfully and is reflective of the level of need and parental agreement. Children and families can reconnect with professionals they know and trust in the family help hubs.
3. The multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) provides a timely, proportionate and child-focused response to safeguarding concerns. Professionals across agencies demonstrate a strong understanding of intervention thresholds. MASH social workers triage contacts robustly and act swiftly to protect children at risk of harm and those in greater need. Clear communication between agencies helps to build the fullest picture of the child's lived experience. This is an improvement since the last inspection. Social workers sensitively consult children's parents when it is safe to do. Experienced and skilled managers provide robust oversight at all decision-

¹ The areas for improvement have been cross-referenced with the outcomes, enablers or principles in the [Children's Social Care: National Framework](#). This statutory guidance sets out the purpose, principles for practice and expected outcomes of children's social care.

making points. Children's records show decisive management guidance, enabling social workers to explore information with confidence and clarity. This results in timely and effective initial screening that supports children to receive the right help and at the right time.

4. The MASH baby clinic plays a vital role in the early identification and safeguarding of unborn babies. Thorough multi-agency information-sharing, supported by informed parental consent, ensures that coordinated safeguarding measures are in place before the child is born. Timely allocation of assessments to highly skilled practitioners ensures that risk factors are identified, including disguised compliance, with a clear analysis of the impact on the child. Pre-birth assessments are of excellent quality. They are family led, historically informed and thoroughly consider parental capacity.
5. The out-of-hours team provides a robust and responsive service when children need help and protection outside normal working hours, including weekends. Joint working between the out-of-hours team, daytime team and other agencies is strong.
6. Social workers develop meaningful relationships with children, including disabled children, using a range of tools to engage them in direct work. Workers from the disabled children's service have accessed a wide variety of training to support them to communicate with this group of children in formats such as Makaton and British Sign Language.
7. Social work assessments of children's needs are of consistently high quality. Assessments are detailed, analytical and underpinned by the child's voice. Each child's unique needs and risks are clearly identified, which is an improvement since the last inspection. Family history is fully explored by professionally curious social workers, who involve family networks in safety planning. While risk is well recognised, assessment tools are not consistently used to support analysis. This is mitigated by robust management oversight, which objectively reviews assessment quality, recommendations and proposed next steps.
8. When a safeguarding response is required, strategy meetings are held promptly and are very well attended by police and other agency professionals. Child protection enquiries are thorough and lead to well-coordinated responses where the child's vulnerability and voice are central to decision-making and planning. When child protection conferences are required, these are timely and result in effective information-sharing forums, which involve parents and children's extended family members. Partner agencies consistently engage and contribute to coordinated multi-agency planning that is child centred and needs led. Conference chairs oversee and review child protection plans effectively.
9. Children's plans, including those for disabled children, are developed alongside families, using restorative practice that empowers them, so they are central to decision-making and support plans. Core group meetings are held regularly and

involve relevant family members and professionals. This helps identify changing need and ensures coordinated responses that help make and sustain changes so that children's circumstances improve.

10. Children who are missing from education or who are electively home educated are promptly identified through robust support and effective safeguarding systems. Engagement with children and families fosters a positive working relationship and ensures that parents have information to make informed decisions about their child's education, and, when possible, supports children to get back into full-time education.
11. Children at risk of going missing from home and being exploited receive a highly effective service from Evolve, the specialist exploitation team. Children are routinely offered timely return home interviews, enabling professionals to understand the reasons for children going missing, and to inform safety and trigger plans for children. When concerns are escalating, multi-agency child exploitation meetings are convened promptly to share intelligence and coordinate disruption strategies. Comprehensive exploitation risk assessments are completed by social workers and inform multi-agency interventions. Children receive support from knowledgeable, skilled practitioners who build trusting relationships through consistent, trauma-informed engagement. This relational approach increases children's confidence in trusted adults, enabling disclosure and strengthening protective factors.
12. When risks to children persist despite intervention, the Public Law Outline process is initiated effectively to improve children's circumstances and avoid unnecessary escalation to court. Parental engagement is meaningful, helping parents to understand the seriousness of concerns and what needs to improve. Additional assessments are undertaken, including of extended family members as potential carers, ensuring that all safe and sustainable options to improve children's situations and keep them within their families are explored. Senior leaders robustly track children's experiences during pre-proceedings, ensuring that decision-making remains timely, proportionate and focused on the child's best interests. For some children, this improves their situation, so they are diverted away from legal proceedings.
13. Children are supported to remain at home or within their family and friends network when it is safe to do so. The Engage team provides bespoke practical and emotional family support to help achieve this, using a relational approach alongside other social care interventions. Evidence-based programmes and community resources engage families and empower them to make sustained change.
14. Since the last inspection, the local authority designated officer (LADO) service has strengthened. Allegation screening and allegation management meetings are thorough and timely, with a clear focus on safeguarding children and vulnerable

people. Awareness of the LADO role across external agencies and engagement with the service have increased, resulting in improved relationships.

15. Children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless are listened to and taken seriously, with professionals responding quickly and respectfully. Their safety is prioritised and, where appropriate, efforts are made to help them remain within their family network, when this is safe and in their best interests. Children are informed of their rights, including the option to enter care, and this is reflected in their records even if advocacy offers are not always explicitly documented. Children receive intensive, practical support, whether moving into accommodation or reconnecting with family, and this support continues for as long as necessary.
16. Children who are privately fostered benefit from a timely, child-centred safeguarding response that ensures that their needs are understood, their voices are heard, and their well-being is actively promoted. The child's voice, parental consent and the views of all involved parties are central to the assessment process, ensuring that decisions are inclusive and well informed. Child in need plans are meaningful and reviewed regularly, ensuring that the arrangement remains suitable and that the child continues to make progress.
17. There has been a strong focus on the identification of young carers since the last inspection, which has significantly strengthened the assessment and support of young carers, ensuring that their unique needs are recognised and addressed in a timely, child-focused way. Children benefit from a range of targeted practical and emotional interventions that give them time away from caring responsibilities and space to be children. For those already receiving support from children's social care, their carer-related needs are now fully integrated into existing plans, including early help, ensuring a joined-up and holistic approach.

The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding

18. Children move into care only when it is no longer safe for them to remain at home, and this decision is made with very careful consideration of their individual needs, safety and long-term well-being. Family and friends networks have usually already been explored by social workers, who recognise the importance of maintaining safe and familiar relationships and cultural identity. Where kinship carers have already been identified through network mapping and strong relational work, this often means suitability assessments are already complete. This enables children to move into safe and known environments even in an emergency.
19. When kinship carers are not a viable option, alternatives such as foster care and residential care are carefully and sensitively explored by social workers. Wherever possible, these decisions are made with the fullest understanding of what is known about the child at the time of the decision for the child to come into care. Sometimes, it is not always possible to secure the most appropriate placement for

a child immediately, particularly in urgent or complex situations. This results in a small number of children having short-term placements.

20. Since the last inspection, senior leaders have undertaken a wholescale review and transformation of their sufficiency strategy. Fostering and residential services have been reset and rebuilt and are now providing a more resilient and responsive range of placements to meet children's needs. This has successfully increased the availability of local homes for children, reduced unplanned moves and increased placement stability.
21. Social workers carefully and sensitively assess children's needs to help them identify suitable homes that can best meet the child's needs. Managers and senior leaders oversee key decision points for children to come into care and ensure that moves are well coordinated and, when possible, thoughtfully planned. A range of permanence options are explored as soon as children enter care, and their progress is monitored through highly effective panels and planning meetings that result in timely decision-making for children.
22. There is a strong focus on providing a secure family life for a child within kinship arrangements while they grow up and beyond. Concentrated efforts support kinship carers to become special guardians at the earliest opportunity if this is the right plan for the child. Applications to court are timely and high-quality evidence informs court decisions for children. Special guardian support plans are detailed and promote the stability of these arrangements.
23. Most children, including disabled children in care and those living outside the borough, live in stable homes, allowing them to form trusting and consistent relationships with those who care for them. On the rare occasions when a registered home is unavailable, a very small number of children live in unregistered children's homes for the shortest period. The arrangements are meticulously monitored and subject to weekly senior management oversight and scrutiny. The quality assurance (QA) mechanisms of these arrangements are further strengthened by the commissioning service, which carries out visits to settings and engages providers in applying to register with Ofsted. The very small number of children in these placements receive a high frequency of visits and multi-agency support to continually assess their safety and care.
24. Since the last inspection, the fostering service has been strengthened, which has prioritised stability for children and improved training and support for foster carers. The comprehensive training offer provides foster carers with a wide range of training and learning events, including needs-led therapeutic approaches from the Empower team, which is an in-house therapeutic service. There is strong management oversight across the fostering service from team managers to the assistant director level, providing senior leaders with a clear line of sight to children and carers' experiences. Fostering recruitment plans are ambitious and underpinned by strengthened governance through the new Fostering Transformation Board.

25. Fostering and kinship assessments are of high quality, with strengths and vulnerabilities proportionately weighted. Assessments are timely and occasional delays are purposeful to ensure thorough information-gathering and analysis. Foster carers report positive, respectful and well-informed assessment experiences and are well prepared for panel.
26. Care is taken to ensure that homes are suitable for children and meet their needs well so that children make progress from their starting points. There is a strong emphasis on children living as close to their communities as possible, when it is safe to do so. Therefore, when children live out of the area or in children's residential homes, for the majority this is according to their assessed needs.
27. Children return home when it is in their best interests. Decisions are well considered, involving relevant professionals and family and based on assessments that are underpinned by evidence. Planning ensures that families continue to receive support when the child leaves care and includes safety planning, so families know how to respond if they experience challenges or difficulties.
28. Early permanence is secured for children through a plan for adoption supported by robust assessments when it is in the children's best interests. Concurrent planning explores all viable options so that decisions for children are timely and well considered. The matching process is thoughtful, focused on the suitability of the match and takes into consideration children's individual needs as well as their need to live with brothers and sisters. Introductions for children with their adoptive parents are well managed. This helps children settle with their permanent family.
29. The strong working relationship between the local authority and the regional adoption agency helps to ensure that the needs of local children with a plan of adoption are met. There is a clear recruitment strategy in place to increase the number of adopters approved by the agency. The assessment, training and support of adopters is robust. High-quality preparation training supports prospective adopters to fully understand the varied needs of children who need adoptive families and prepares them well for a child joining their family.
30. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are well supported by committed social workers who are sensitive to their cultural needs and their previous experiences. Social workers strive to match children with carers who are culturally aware and able to support children to access appropriate resources within their community.
31. Children's plans are child centred and individual and well informed by thorough assessments that highlight children's wishes and feelings. Children are actively encouraged to participate in their reviews with other important people. Creative approaches by social workers, such as using board games, engage children so they feel confident to express their views and influence their care decisions. Review recommendations are clear and aspirational for children. Letters to

children after reviews from independent reviewing officers (IROs) are child centred and warm in tone, providing poignant messages that celebrate the child's achievements and progress and help them to understand their plan.

32. Children receive timely and responsive support for their health and emotional well-being wherever they live. Health assessments, dental and optician checks are arranged promptly and sensitively, helping children feel cared for and prioritised. The Empower therapeutic team provides consultations for professionals and children's carers to help them respond with empathy and insight to children's mental health needs, and provides bespoke therapy directly to children when necessary.
33. IROs champion children's rights and engage children and ensure that children's voices are heard and respected. Children have meaningful relationships with their IROs. Many have known their IROs for several years, resulting in IROs having a deep understanding of the child and their unique history. IROs keep in touch with children's social workers about children's progress and the impact of their care planning, which creates a solid foundation of support to children.
34. Children are visited regularly by skilled social workers, who have the time to purposefully engage with them. Social workers are professionally curious and interested in their children's progress and safety. They build positive relationships with those who matter most to children and involve them in planning and decision-making, but always with the child's voice front and centre. They undertake high-quality direct work with children that aligns with the child's interests and understanding. Workers convey important information about the child's history and the reasons for decisions in a nurturing and sensitive way.
35. Children are supported to keep in touch with important people in their lives. Family time assessments are well written and consider risks and family vulnerabilities, strengths and children's views. Assessments influence child-focused family plans that are flexible and involve professionals being present only when necessary to keep children safe. Social workers' meaningful collaboration with parents, despite complex challenges, increases parental engagement and helps children to maintain important bonds and links to their personal identity, past and present.
36. Children are supported and motivated to achieve their educational aspirations. Collaborative work between teams across the organisation ensures that children are supported to achieve academically. The virtual school is very well led by experienced leaders, who are supported by committed and skilled staff who deliver a range of targeted support to children in care and their schools. The voice of the child, attendance targets and aspirational goals are consistently reflected in personal education plans. As a result, children make positive progress from their starting points, and most children remain in education, employment or training after Year 11.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

37. Children in care are allocated a personal adviser (PA) well in advance of them leaving care or reaching their 18th birthday. PAs consistently attend children's care planning meetings and carry out joint visits with the child's social worker, contributing to children's care planning. This arrangement allows children to develop meaningful and trusting relationships with workers who will continue to support and befriend them into adulthood.
38. PAs are genuinely interested in their care leavers' well-being and progress. PAs have a detailed knowledge of young people's needs and histories and are persistent in making sure that young people receive the right levels of visiting and help that meets their individual needs. Consequently, care leavers are confident in asking for help and reassurance when needed. All the care leavers who inspectors spoke with were incredibly positive about their PA and the support they have received.
39. PAs promote a culture of keeping in touch with their care leavers and this is reflected in the high numbers of care leavers in contact. PAs use a range of methods to engage with young people, including via home visit, text message, phone call or voice note. When young people reach 21, their support needs are reviewed, and young people are consulted on whether they wish to continue to receive support. These conversations are well recorded. For young people who opt out, they are reminded through a minimum of annual contact that they can return for support when they need it.
40. Pathway assessments and plans include the practical steps and support that young people need, but they are very long, and young people do not find them a useful document. Leaders have already recognised this and consultation with young people has resulted in a revised format so that plans have a greater impact and value.
41. The 'Journey' hub is a valued and well-resourced centre for care leavers to access a range of services from multi-agency professionals, such as housing, virtual school and health. Activities in the hub provide young people with a safe space, opportunity to connect with others, spend time with their PA or use facilities such as the kitchen and washing machines. This serves as a significant part of the keeping in touch service for care leavers and increases the likelihood that they will access support when they need it.
42. Care leavers live in suitable accommodation. Young people who spoke to inspectors said that they feel safe where they live. There is a range of housing options, but leaders recognise that more work is needed to increase sufficiency further to provide care leavers with even more choice. Some young people have access to independent flats that help them to develop the skills needed to manage their own tenancies. If successful, these flats become their 'forever home'. Some care leavers choose to remain living with foster carers in 'staying

put' arrangements. Their living circumstances are encouraged, supported and regularly reviewed through pathway planning.

43. Care leavers in Rotherham benefit from council tax exemption and have priority status when applying for local council housing. Leaders are advocating for their care leavers by actively engaging with other regional areas to improve reciprocal arrangements so that young people who live out of borough have the same rights and entitlements to housing and council tax exemption.
44. Care leavers' physical and emotional health needs are well considered. Care leavers are supported to register and access universal services alongside engaging in the health drop-in sessions with a named nurse at the Journey hub. Care leavers are not routinely receiving their health history document or reminded how to access this information. Talking therapies are promptly offered to care leavers struggling with emotional needs or experiencing periods of mental ill health. Young people also have full access to the local authority employee assistance programme. This enables young people to have choice on where they access help.
45. Care leavers are encouraged to access education and career opportunities and reach their potential. Care leavers spoke highly of the virtual school and the practical and emotional support that they receive to access employment, education and training. Care leavers are provided with information about their rights and entitlements and are aware of the local offer. Leaders are ambitious to continue to strengthen the offer according to care leavers' needs and wishes.
46. PAs' work with highly vulnerable care leavers focuses on reducing risks and encouraging change. Risks associated with drugs and alcohol misuse and harmful relationships are recognised effectively. PAs engage with multi-agency networks to provide wraparound support to young people and increase their safety, understanding the young person's behaviour in the context of past trauma. PAs talk openly to young people about worries, while remaining respectful and acknowledging that change cannot be forced. Instead, PAs are persistent and regularly remind young people that they care about them and are available to provide support when they are ready.
47. Care leavers in custody receive an effective response. PAs are sensitive to young people's individual needs. They show them empathy and are persistent when encouraging young people to stay in touch and access support. Workers make regular visits and recognise young people's need for connection to their community, for example sending them local newspapers. PAs contribute to young people's resettlement plans in preparation for young people's release.
48. Care leavers who are seeking asylum are well supported in Rotherham. PAs understand the unique needs of this group of young people and ensure that their plans meet their needs.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: outstanding

49. Since the last inspection in 2022, there has been sustained and visible council-wide commitment to placing children at the heart of strategic decision-making in Rotherham. Across party political leadership and senior management, children's social care is recognised as a core responsibility, with a shared ambition to improve outcomes for children and families. There is a strong and embedded commitment to corporate parenting and the rights of children and young people, underpinned by a strategic vision that translates into tangible action. Sustained investment and ambitious planning have enabled development across children's services, including in sufficiency of homes for children.

50. The dedicated Strategic Director has established and nurtured a confident children's services leadership team that remains highly effective and strategically focused, providing consistent direction and oversight across children's services. Transitions for new leaders have been carefully managed to strengthen leadership while ensuring continuity and minimal disruption to service delivery.

51. The voice of children is now a defining strength of the service, reflecting a significant and sustained improvement since the last inspection. This progress has been driven by strong, visible leadership that empowers staff to place children at the heart of everything they do. Senior leaders have aligned systems and expectations so that children's views are consistently captured, respected and used to shape both individual care plans and wider service development. The redesign of the corporate parenting partnership board creates meaningful opportunities for children to hold leaders to account alongside groups such as the 'In Care Voice' (children in care group) and 'Look Ahead' (care leavers group), young inspectors and young journalists, who also have real impact.

52. Professional relationships across the partnership remain strong, mature and purposeful, enabling consistent collaboration and shared accountability for children in the borough. The partnership understands the needs of local children well and defines its shared priorities around these. The active and committed safeguarding executive group jointly delivers strategic oversight and invests in the sustainability and responsiveness of the safeguarding infrastructure.

53. Senior leaders are outward looking and always seeking to improve. They have a track record of responding effectively to areas for development, new demands and challenges. They are responsive to emerging needs and lead a culture of learning and accountability. Senior leaders have prioritised previous areas for improvement, embedding them into everyday practice to ensure that children receive consistently high-quality support. As a result, practice has strengthened across all areas of the service.

54. The effective QA framework plays a critical role in helping leaders and managers to understand the quality of children's experiences across services. It is comprehensive in scope and underpinned by high-quality performance data, audit

activity, and feedback from children, families and practitioners, supporting the self-evaluation to be founded in evidence. Importantly, the high-quality data and insight generated through QA activity is equally accessed by elected members, strengthening corporate oversight and reinforcing a shared accountability for improving outcomes. This collective understanding ensures that strategic decisions are informed by the issues leaders know matter most, and that is children's safety, well-being and lived experience.

55. The organisation embraces a culture of continuous learning and improvement, where good practice is not only recognised, but also celebrated, shared and embedded to strengthen outcomes for children. Insights from frontline practice, audits and feedback are translated into clear recommendations and tangible changes, which are cascaded across the service through practice development sessions, targeted briefings and reflective learning forums. This ensures that staff are consistently equipped with the knowledge, tools and confidence to deliver high-quality, relational care. Clear governance structures provide senior leaders with effective oversight and assurance that learning is being applied where it matters most, resulting in stronger practice.
56. Leaders have nurtured a confident, proud and inspired workforce through visible leadership, strategic investment, and a clear focus on professional development. Staff morale is high, and turnover is stable, with low use of agency staff. Workers' caseloads are manageable, but leaders aim to reduce these further. Workers are confident to seek support when they feel workloads are excessive. When this happens, managers are responsive and take effective action. To support this, leaders have increased capacity through the appointment of family workers within locality teams and advanced practitioners in the care leavers' teams.
57. Supervision is highly effective and mostly regular, providing workers with a helpful reflective space. Staff are consistently very positive about the support and opportunities available to seek advice, guidance and support from their managers. Written records of supervision identify clear actions that workers progress in the desired timescales.
58. This strategic approach to workforce engagement ensures that staff feel informed, empowered and actively connected to the council's vision for children's services. Workers told inspectors that they feel valued and are proud to work for Rotherham. They described a vibrant learning culture and working conditions that place great value on reflection, professional growth and staff influence. This results in workers feeling valued and inspired to do the very best for children, young people and their families.

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