

Annex 3:

Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council Improvement in local children's services

Members' Overview & Scrutiny Committee review
Second workshop: Summary

Isos Partnership

February 2017



Introduction

Context: Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee review

- In 2016, members of Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council's (RMBC) Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee initiated a review of the options for sustaining rapid and long-term improvement in children's services.
- The purpose of the review was to gather a wide range of evidence from within Rotherham's children's services, from across the Council as a whole, from partners supporting Rotherham's improvement journey, and from other local areas about what they had done and what supported had helped them on their improvement journey.
- As part of this process, Isos Partnership, working with the Local Government Association (LGA), was invited to support this review by drawing on the recent LGA-commissioned research we have carried out. This focuses on the enablers and barriers of improvement in local children's services, and on models of external improvement support.

The workshops: Isos' support for this review

- Isos was invited by RMBC and the LGA to facilitate two workshops for members of Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee, senior RMBC leaders and officers, and partners in Rotherham's improvement journey. The first workshop took place on 30 November 2016, and focused on sharing and exploring the findings from our research in order to inform Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny members' evidence-gathering work in other local areas.
- The second workshop took place on 17 February 2017, and focused on drawing together the evidence around two key questions.
 1. **Where is Rotherham currently on its improvement journey?** What has been achieved, what is the evidence?
 2. **What are the priorities for the next stage of Rotherham's improvement journey?** Are conditions in place for further, sustained improvement? What support is needed?
- This document summarises the discussions at the second workshop. A small group of Councillors, officers, Commissioner Bradwell and practice partners lead Debbie Barnes took part in the workshop, bringing a range of views from different professional and lay perspectives.



1 Rotherham's improvement journey: We started with a self-assessment exercise, using the framework from our LGA action research.



1

Rotherham's improvement journey: This page summarises the evidence that you described to support your view of Rotherham improvement journey.

The evidence and rationale you gave for your for self-assessment scores

1

Strategic approach

There is a clear, strategic plan for improvement and clarity about “what good looks like”. The data shows a pattern of improvement and compliance with key performance measures. Core “mission-critical” services are now safe. This picture is supported by Ofsted monitoring reports and feedback from external practice partners. The focus now is on increasing the quality of practice, and ensuring members are kept aware of improvements.

2

Leadership & governance

There is now strong, experienced, credible and stable leadership, both corporately and within children’s services. Heads of Service report feeling empowered and comment positively on the difference over the last twelve months. There is not yet a full complement of team managers in place. Members are rightly challenging for evidence of improvement, and are keen to triangulate this through more regular frontline visits.

3

Engaging & supporting the workforce

The workforce is increasingly stable, as shown by benchmarking data and supported by the findings from Ofsted monitoring visits and peer review. A unifying model of social work practice and new practical tools have been rolled out, and staff say (including to Ofsted) that they understand this has been done to support their work. Positive feedback from new recruits suggests Rotherham is increasingly seen as an employer of choice.

4

Engaging partners

Stronger partnerships at a strategic level, but not always matched at an operational level. Multi-agency audits are taking place, but a more systematic and embedded approach is needed. There have been successes in building better partnerships with schools around SEND, and with the VCS. Would welcome greater challenge from partners, but requires trust and confidence to be built. There is recognition this is an incremental process.

5

Building the supporting apparatus

There is pride in an effective management information and data system, which produces accessible dashboards of benchmarked performance data. These are being used with team managers, with support to help them use data to inform decision-making. Data are being used to inform conversations about children and outcomes, not just numbers. There is further to go, however, to see the impact on outcomes and embed the voice of the child.

6

Fostering innovation

Innovation, in the sense of being open to new approaches and seeking to embed effective ideas in practice, is championed by children’s services leadership and supported by the Council (e.g. investment in new initiatives, participating in the Pause pilot, new approaches around recruitment). In time, the aim is for practitioners to be more innovative, but this comes with a level of risk and will need to be managed carefully.

7

Judicious use of resources

There has been considerable investment in supporting children’s services improvement. There is now a realistic base budget, which has been used to set robust financial plans for next three years. This provides security for children’s services improvement, but will also allow political and corporate leaders to track and monitor the impact and progress of these investments. Members are rightly keen to hold officers to these plans.

Priorities for the future: You highlighted three priorities that should be at the heart of the next stage of Rotherham's children's services improvement journey.

You identified three priorities for the next stage of Rotherham's improvement journey.

Overall, your aspiration is to foster a sense of confidence and pride in Rotherham's children's services, with a culture that is forward-facing and outward-looking, learning from others and generously sharing your experience. Informed by your self-assessment, you identified three key priorities for sustaining improvements.

1. **Ensuring consistently high-quality practice** – there was strong consensus that the next stage of Rotherham's improvement journey should be focused on the transition from a safe, compliant, core service to a consistently high-quality one. Embedding *signs of safety*, strengthening audits and routines to drive practice improvement, strengthening the voice of the child, and securing improvements in LAC services were highlighted as key areas of focus.
2. **Strengthening your engagement with key partners** – you want to build strong relationships with partners so that they are working alongside the Council in planning, developing and delivering services, and are providing healthy, mutual challenge about children's services improvement. In particular, you wanted to strengthen partnership working (a) to tackle the impact of domestic abuse, and (b) with key health services – starting by maximising the value of RMBC-controlled services such as school nurses and health visitors, then seeking to influence improvements in CAMHS services, and then developing approaches with other therapeutic support services.
3. **Maintaining a sustainable budget** – implementing effectively and closely monitoring your three-year financial plans, and ensuring investments in frontline practice support early help and help to reduce demands on statutory services.

You highlighted two areas where you would welcome further support on the next stage of your improvement journey.

1. **Practice-focused support** – you saw an important and ongoing role for external scrutiny, but also that this needed to be balanced with practice-orientated support from other local areas and practitioners in order to support ongoing work to improve the consistency and quality of practice – e.g. around support for LAC, the voice of the child.
2. **Partnership working** – part of the role of external scrutiny in the future may also be to act as the “honest broker” to strengthen relationships, and to build trust, confidence and mutual challenge among strategic partners.

Priorities for the future: We used our LGA research to consider the evidence of whether the conditions are in place for sustained improvement in Rotherham.

Condition	Descriptor	Evidence
Capacity to self-assess accurately	Able to identify strengths and weaknesses, accepts external feedback, and uses external support effectively.	<p>Routine self-assessments are embedded – growing culture of reflection and challenge, now systematic.</p> <p>There is a high level of congruence between internal self-assessment and external feedback – peer reviews, practice partner reviews, Commissioner reports, Ofsted monitoring visits. Clarity about what is being invested in improvements, and how this is working.</p> <p>Members are asking probing questions of children’s services – this is positive and important. Equally important is the willingness of members to triangulate with feedback gathered from thematic frontline visits.</p> <p>Continued outward-facing engagements – Rotherham has not “hunkered down”, but has remained open to others.</p>
Capacity to develop strategic priorities that will address weaknesses	Understands what works to drive improvement, and able to develop strategies and actions to deliver improvement.	
Capacity to implement these strategic priorities swiftly and effectively	Able to put in place right resources, workforce capacity, and corporate, political and partner support for improvement.	
		<p>Significant (“heroic”) investments for a council of its size – long-term financial plans, but also monitoring arrangements to take account of changing circumstances.</p> <p>Strong alignment of Council and children’s services priorities – the Council has embraced the “seven tests”, and there is clarity about how Council plans, financial plans and children’s services plans fit together in the long term.</p>

2

Priorities for the future: In considering options for the next stage of Rotherham's improvement journey, you highlighted seven key principles.

You argued that however Rotherham's children's services are arranged in the future, the approach agreed upon must ...

1

Be in the best interests of children in Rotherham – the right future arrangements must be those that provide the best platform for sustaining improvement services that support children and keep them safe

2

Be sustainable – the right future arrangements must be those that offer a sustainable long-term basis for delivering high-quality children's services

3

Work *with* people, rather than doing *to* them – particularly by engaging RMBC staff and key strategic partner agencies

4

Involve robust external scrutiny – you recognise this will remain an important part of Rotherham's ongoing improvement journey, and should be embraced as an opportunity to track progress and address barriers

5

Maintain strong elected member oversight of children's services – all Councillors, including the Lead Member, continue to exercise corporate parenting and scrutiny roles (and, in case of the Lead Member, statutory responsibilities) to secure the best outcomes for young people in Rotherham regardless of which model is adopted

6

Maintain the integration of services – you are keen to avoid creating barriers at key service interfaces, such as between early help and social care, or with education services

7

Maintain links with other local services and strategies that contribute to young people's development and long-term outcomes – particularly the links with housing, economic growth and jobs and skills



Priorities for the future: The next stage of Rotherham's children's services improvement journey – final points from the workshop discussion.

- **Through the Overview & Scrutiny Committee review and your discussions with national decision-makers, you are keen to have a principled, evidence-informed discussion about how best to sustain improvements in Rotherham's children's services.** You have set out priorities (improving the quality of practice, strengthening partnerships), seven core principles, and specific actions around strengthening self-assessment and challenge (the voice of the child, enabling members to triangulate evidence through thematic frontline visits) that can inform your considerations.
- **One of the key messages you emphasised in the workshop was that you are now two years into your children's services improvement journey** and, furthermore, that whatever options are considered in the future must not destabilise what has been put in place over the past two years.
- **The Overview & Scrutiny Committee review has visited local areas that have established or are establishing alternative delivery models.** You are aware that the numbers of alternative delivery models are small, that many are in their early stages, and therefore that there is not a firm and broad evidence-base about their progress. In our LGA research, we explore two types of alternative delivery models – executive leadership models and new organisations – and discuss some of the potential benefits local areas that have developed these models have achieved. A key finding from our research is that alternative delivery models can play a role in helping to overcome persistent and systemic barriers and to create the conditions for sustained improvement to take place. (Another key finding, however, is that these benefits are not exclusive to alternative delivery models – rather, in certain circumstances, they have helped to overcome barriers that the local area had not been able to previously.)
- **As we discussed in our workshop, you are confident that you will be able to draw on evidence to show that improvements are taking place in Rotherham's children's services.** You agreed that a key action was to marshal the evidence from external peer reviews, practice partner feedback, Commissioner reports, and Ofsted monitoring visits in order to validate and provide assurance of the progress and improvements that have been made in Rotherham.
- **Equally, however, you were not complacent and recognised that the way in which children's services may be delivered in the future would need to evolve and change according to the demands on the service,** and that there may be benefits in exploring new ways of commissioning local services to meet local needs more effectively.

