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Mr Matthew Sampson
Director of Children's Services
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Dear Mr Sampson

Monitoring visit of Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council Children's Services Department

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Sandwell Children's Services on 6 and 7 December 2016. This was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged to be inadequate in February 2015. Two of Her Majesty's Inspectors, Jenny Turnross and John Roughton carried out this visit.

Senior leaders continue to demonstrate a commitment to improving services for children. Some improvements have been made since the last monitoring visit, particularly with case recording. The pace of change to tackle workforce capacity is too slow. The work completed during this monitoring visit indicates that there has been insufficient focus on the quality and standard of practice for young people as they prepare to leave care. Therefore, the local authority is not yet making satisfactory progress overall to improve services for all children and young people in Sandwell.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the local authority response to children looked after as they prepare to leave care and their transition to adulthood. The focus of this visit included an evaluation of the recently introduced audit team's work. Inspectors also considered the overall progress that has been made since the second monitoring visit on 6 and 7 September 2016.

The visit considered a range of evidence, including tracking of selected case files, sampling of electronic case records and supervision notes, and speaking to a range of staff, including managers, social workers and other practitioners.

Summary of findings

- Quality assurance is improving. Managers are producing stronger case file audits. However, this work is not yet making a sufficient difference to the overall quality of practice.
- The pace of change remains too slow. A number of areas identified in the local authority improvement plan still require immediate and focused attention to ensure that all children receive a good enough level of support.
- Not enough attention is given to young people's needs as they prepare to leave care. More needs to be done to ensure that all care leavers, including children who have disabilities and unaccompanied asylum seeking children, know their rights and entitlements.

Evaluation of progress

Senior managers have improved the quality of their case file audits to help them understand current practice and to support a culture of learning and improvement. Team managers are now completing file audits, with social workers also involved. During this visit, four of the six audits completed by the local authority and tracked by inspectors were of good quality. The issues identified were accurate. However, auditors had not identified critical issues in two of the audits where children were receiving an inadequate service. More improvements are needed to strengthen the quality assurance arrangements because children in Sandwell are not yet receiving a consistently good service.

Senior managers have revised their improvement plan. The 'quality of practice' element of the improvement plan shows that there continues to be steady progress in many areas, particularly at the 'front door' of the service. However, there are some 'hard to shift' challenges. Consequently, change is not happening soon enough in all areas. Caseloads are reducing, and this is positive progress. However, there are not yet enough social workers and managers. Case allocation does not take account of the complexity of a child's needs. As a result, a number of children who have clearly identified needs wait too long to receive much needed support.

Clear management direction is present on most children's case files, and this is an improvement since the last visit. Team managers are conscientiously working to ensure that children's cases have sufficient oversight. However, team managers have too many social workers to supervise and this weakens their ability to provide good quality supervision. Furthermore, there are limited arrangements for contingency planning to ensure support when team managers are not available. Managers are not consistently applying the recently revised supervision policy. Consequently, not all social workers have the same level of support. The assistant principal social workers are not being used to their full effect; often they are used to cover social work vacancies in the service.

Case recording in the children looked after service is appropriate and timely. Social workers are keeping their records up to date. Some social workers write monthly case summaries and these provide a helpful overview of casework that supports timely case progression and results in improved services for some children. Social workers in the children looked after service know the children well. While having up to nine social workers to supervise, managers, like social workers, are diligent and positive about their work.

Pathway assessments are completed as young people reach 16 years of age and, in most cases, these assessments clearly inform pathway plans. Most assessments are of an adequate quality. Risk is generally considered, although there is limited evidence of the local authority's preferred model of social work practice being used. Social workers are uncertain of the practice standards for reassessment and this means that some children do not always have an assessment when their needs change or risks change.

Pathway plans completed in the children looked after service are timely and comprehensive. However, these plans are not routinely signed by young people and it is not always possible to evidence their engagement in the development of their plans. Senior managers recognise that the template is not user-friendly, and work is underway to revise the plan in consultation with care leavers. Pathway plans are agreed by independent reviewing officers (IROs) at statutory reviews. The IROs' 'footprint' is far more evident, with case entries and IRO decisions entered on children's files; this is an improvement since the last monitoring visit. However, there continues to be insufficient challenge by IROs to ensure that plans progress when there are delays. The new dispute resolution procedure is not yet strengthening the progress of children who need the support of their IRO.

Social workers in the service for children who have a disability are not routinely completing pathway assessments and pathway plans. Consequently, young people who have disabilities do not know their rights and entitlements as care leavers. Recently, managers have developed a system to ensure more joined up working between the children with a disability service, adult transitions and care leavers services. However, there are still some relevant and former relevant young people who have disabilities and who are unknown to the care leaving team. Young people who have a disability, and who transfer to the adult transitions service, are assessed for an adult social care service when they reach 17 years and 6 months. This is far too late and results in some young people continuing to be supported by children's social care services beyond the age of 18. These delays in decision making create unnecessary anxiety for children. The response to the emotional health and well-being needs of some children is not good enough. The recent creation of the primary healthcare assistants is positive, but this investment is not yet demonstrating impact. Often, young people who have very complex needs are not meeting the criteria for adult services' support and this is a gap in provision for this vulnerable group.

Young people do not transfer to their personal advisers soon enough. Contrary to the local authority's policy, young people are not being allocated personal advisers often enough at the age of 17 years and 6 months. Due to high caseloads in the care leavers' service, there is limited opportunity to adhere to the transfer policy or to allocate children with complex needs sooner. The new manager of the service intends to prioritise this issue, recognising that the relationship between personal advisers and care leavers is critical to supporting a young person into adulthood.

The local authority's response to unaccompanied asylum seeking children is unsatisfactory. Risk assessments are not completed when the child is first identified. Young people are placed in foster homes with too many unknown risk factors and this practice presents a serious safeguarding concern. While personal advisers support unaccompanied asylum seeking young people to prepare for adulthood, there are extensive delays by the Home Office in making decisions about young people's immigration status. As a result, due to their future uncertainties, longer term education and housing options are not always considered or achieved. The emotional health and well-being needs of unaccompanied asylum seeking children are not given enough attention.

The children in care council and the care leavers' forum are vibrant and influential groups. They are involved in a range of positive projects to support children and young people, such as 'Total Respect' training and interview panels. The Sandwell 'pledge' to care leavers is being reviewed. The local authority has not yet signed up to the national care leavers' charter. Children and young people have recently supported the development of a 'rights and entitlements' booklet for children looked after, but there is no equivalent booklet available for care leavers. Consequently, senior leaders cannot be assured that all children looked after and care leavers are aware of their rights and entitlements.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you, Sharon, and your staff for the continued positive engagement in this monitoring process. I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Jenny Turnross
Her Majesty's Inspector