

Inspection of safeguarding

Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council

Inspection dates: 23-27 January 2012

Reporting inspector: Stephen Hart HMI

Age group: All

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About this inspection

1. Sandwell council is currently subject to an Improvement Notice. This was issued by the Minister of State at the previous Department for Families, Education and Skills (now the Department for Education) "due to poor performance and decline in children's social care on the basis of evidence contained in the 2009 Ofsted inspection of safeguarding and looked after children services, which judged safeguarding to be inadequate".
2. Consequently the purpose of this further inspection of Sandwell's safeguarding arrangements is to evaluate the contribution made by relevant services in the local area towards ensuring that children and young people are properly safeguarded and protected. The inspection team consisted of three of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI). The inspection was carried out under the Children Act 2004.
3. The evidence evaluated by inspectors included:
 - the results of discussions with front line staff and managers, senior officers including the Chief Executive, the Executive Director of People Services (the statutory director of children's services), the Chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board, the Chair of the Improvement Board, elected members and a range of community representatives
 - analysis and evaluation of reports from a variety of sources including a review of the Children and Young People's Plan, the council's improvement plan developed in response to the terms of the Government statutory notice to improve, performance data and information from the inspection of local settings
 - a review of 67 case files for children and young people with a range of need. This provided a view of services provided over time and the quality of reporting, recording and decision making undertaken. In addition two cases files relating to the work of the Local Authority Designated Officer were selected for examination
 - the outcomes of the most recent annual unannounced inspection of local authority contact, referral and assessment services undertaken in February 2011
 - interviews and focus groups with front line professionals, managers and senior health professionals, the Police and members of the Sandwell Safeguarding Children Board.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

4. All inspection judgements are made using the following four point scale.

| | |
|-----------------------|---|
| Outstanding (Grade 1) | A service that significantly exceeds minimum requirements |
| Good (Grade 2) | A service that exceeds minimum requirements |
| Adequate (Grade 3) | A service that only meets minimum requirements |
| Inadequate (Grade 4) | A service that does not meet minimum requirements |

Service information

5. Sandwell, comprising of the towns of West Bromwich, Oldbury, Rowley Regis, Smethwick, Tipton and Wednesbury, was formed in 1974 and is one of seven children's services areas in the West Midlands conurbation. Children and young people aged 0 to 18 years represent almost 25% of the total population of 292,800. The population is diverse and includes children and young people from a wide range of ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds and 23% of the population are from minority ethnic groups (2009). Deprivation levels in Sandwell are relatively high and the area is ranked 12th most deprived in England, with over 60% of Sandwell's most deprived areas falling into the 20% most deprived nationally.
6. Strategic partnerships have been established in the area including the Sandwell Local Safeguarding Children Board, Sandwell Children's Trust Board and the Sandwell Corporate Parenting Board. The Children's Trust membership includes representation from the local council, Sandwell Primary Care Trust (PCT), Black Country Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, Sandwell and West Birmingham Hospitals, the voluntary sector, Sandwell College, West Midlands Police, Sandwell Local Safeguarding Children Board and the Probation Service.
7. A total of 335 children and young people are the subject of child protection plans (end of December 2011), a further 1,370 are children in need and 559 children and young people are in the care of Sandwell council.
8. Sandwell is currently commissioning children's centre services from external providers. The new network is based on seven localities co-terminus with the six towns' boundaries (West Bromwich being divided into two) and each of the seven contracted providers will be responsible for delivering the service across one of the defined localities. The use of

common assessment has continued to increase and is now available across the whole borough.

9. Sandwell has nine infant schools (including one trust), eight junior schools (including two trusts) and 77 primary schools (including six trusts), eight secondary schools (including four trusts) and nine secondary academies. Sandwell also has four special schools and seven pupil referral units providing 201 places.
10. Sandwell Primary Care Trust is currently responsible for commissioning and planning health services. Since April 2011, and in preparation for the changes to health commissioning and governance arrangements, three General Practitioner (GP) led local clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) have been formed and joined CCG Sandwell and West Birmingham. Sandwell and West Birmingham Hospitals NHS Trust provide acute hospital care for children. In addition the Trust provides community services, including health visiting, nursing and therapy services. Specialist children's health care is provided through Birmingham Children's Hospital and child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) are provided by the Black Country Partnership NHS Foundation Trust with other commissioned agencies providing a range of community interventions.

Safeguarding services

Overall effectiveness

Grade 3 (adequate)

11. The overall effectiveness of safeguarding services is adequate. Sandwell children's services have made satisfactory progress across almost all areas of their improvement plan since the Government issued an improvement notice following Ofsted's safeguarding and looked after children inspection of November 2009 and the trajectory of progress is largely positive. The Executive Director and her senior management team have a full understanding of the improvement task and its magnitude and they have prioritised key areas for immediate change and put in place arrangements to support service quality in other areas until the necessary improvements can be made. The highest priority has been to focus on the front line contact and referral services and over the last year significant improvement to the processes and service quality has been achieved. All child protection concerns are immediately acted upon and forwarded by the duty social work manager for appropriate response and all children with child protection plans are allocated to a qualified social worker. A minority of staff across the partnership outside of the children's service are still experiencing difficulty in identifying and consistently responding to safeguarding concerns, a situation not helped by the agreed referral process not being fully embedded or used consistently in all partner agencies. Further accessible and free training opportunity continues to be directed at these staff groups.

12. Although progress has been slower, recent improvements in the common assessment and care management arrangements are discernable and there is a clear understanding of what needs to be done to improve further. This is particularly in relation to strengthening the quality of analysis in assessments, improving the process for holding and recording strategy discussions, re-enforcing the outcome focus of care plans and achieving consistently high standards of management oversight and decision making.
13. Key performance indicators are mostly showing improvement and work is continuing to secure the necessary associated improvements in quality of practice. Plans have been implemented to ensure that front line managers and staff are supported to improve through good training and development opportunities and recruitment has been effective at most levels of the service, with the exception of team manager grades where despite concerted efforts, challenges still exist to attract and recruit staff of the required calibre. Recognizing the problem and the pressing need to secure good front line management, cash incentives have now been made available to help attract suitable candidates. A performance management culture is being established, supported by a range of audit activity which, although wide ranging and appropriately targeted to areas of need, does not yet have sufficient outcome focus. Partnership and governance arrangements are strengthening and the Sandwell Safeguarding Children Board (SSCB) under the new independent chair is growing in confidence and effectiveness aided by an appropriate membership. However, its aim to fully play its part in improving service quality through its professional leadership role is being undermined by not yet having access to the full range of performance and audit data which is currently gathered across the council area.
14. Senior politicians and the Chief Executive have actively supported developments through resourcing. Despite this, increases in demand for safeguarding and child protection services have led to significant capacity pressures which has resulted in a high number of children in need cases being overseen by managers rather than by an allocated social worker.

Capacity for improvement

Grade 3 (Adequate)

15. The capacity to improve is adequate. The local authority and its partners have, over the last year, made improvements to the quality of a range of services and there are firm plans to secure sustainable further change. Ambitions for continual improvement are articulated well and there is a published commitment to be judged good or better within three years. Priorities, which largely reflect the terms of the Improvement Notice and overseen by the Improvement Board, are extensive in number and wide in scope. There is awareness that consideration needs to be given to revising their number and sharpening their focus on actions to improve the quality of practice. Achievement against priorities is kept under constant review

and systematic reporting requirements ensure that Improvement Board members, councillors and senior managers are made fully aware of progress, trends and challenges on a frequent basis.

16. The progress that has been made has translated to improved outcomes for some children and young people and once their need is recognised they are consistently receiving more timely services. Children and young people are also enabled to contribute their wishes and feelings to assessments and conferences and are being more involved in planning the services they receive.

Areas for improvement

17. In order to improve the quality of provision and services for safeguarding children and young people in Sandwell, the local authority and its partners should take the following action.

Immediately:

- take steps to allocate all children in need cases that require social care services
- assess the current social work staffing levels and their capacity to meet increased demand for safeguarding and child protection services and take priority action to address any shortfall
- enable all staff across the children's partnership to identify and respond to safeguarding concerns.

Within three months:

- establish a referral process across the partnership which ensures that referrers understand thresholds for access to services and their responsibility for making appropriate referrals that provide accurate information to enable decisions to be made
- strengthen the quality of analysis in assessments
- strengthen the outcome focus of all child protection and children in need plans
- ensure that the management oversight of cases, supervision arrangements and decision making are consistent and robust and where necessary introduce measures to secure improved performance.

Within six months:

- continue to strengthen the professional leadership role of the SSCB by enabling it to have full access to relevant performance information

- ensure that all audit frameworks for safeguarding and child protection have a clear outcome focus.

Safeguarding outcomes for children and young people

Children and young people are safe and feel safe

Grade 3 (Adequate)

18. Safeguarding outcomes for children and young people are adequate. When the safeguarding and child protection needs of children and young people are clearly identified, they are responded to satisfactorily. However the process for recording strategy discussions is lacking in clarity and is therefore applied inconsistently. Although this made tracking the process in case records more complicated, no children were left at increased risk of significant harm as a result. All children with child protection plans are allocated to qualified social workers. Appropriate systems have been put in place to ensure that children with child protection plans can be identified clearly by health professionals when children present to accident and emergency, GPs and walk in centres. A recent health audit confirmed all children on a child protection plan requiring medical help were identified appropriately.
19. A total of 67 case files were examined. Of these the 16 cases selected by Inspectors for detailed examination showed satisfactory work which kept children appropriately safeguarded in all except one case. The exceptional case was referred back to a senior manager for further work but there was no indication that the identified deficiencies reflected a more systemic problem. Although training is available, which is free to the voluntary sector, there are cases which show that some professionals and workers from voluntary sector organisations across the partnership are uncertain in identifying and responding to safeguarding concerns. Children and young people in these cases are reliant upon effective management supervision and oversight to identify their needs and to direct appropriate responses. However in more recent cases inspectors saw focused work with managerial direction and guidance, good analysis of risk and protective factors and evaluation of progress leading to improved outcomes for the children and young people concerned. Good progress now ensures that the views of children and young people are being considered effectively in assessments and planning. However, although progress has been made in recording issues about equality and diversity, evidence that they are systematically explored in assessments and planning processes is more variable.
20. A significant number of children in need cases remain unallocated and although there are interim arrangements for managers to monitor the cases, delays in the allocation of cases have prevented children in need

meetings taking place and timely plans from being made. In addition the monitoring of children with disability in receipt of direct payments lacks rigour.

21. The local authority designated officer (LADO) arrangements are satisfactory. Allegations against staff, carers and volunteers are appropriately considered at strategy meetings specifically to consider the risk posed by the alleged perpetrator. Meetings are attended by appropriate agencies, minutes are thorough and demonstrate that risks are identified clearly and appropriate action is taken to address these.
22. A recent internal audit of the council's private fostering arrangements found significant concerns about the awareness of private fostering and how privately fostered children were responded to by the council. The major shortcomings have been addressed and the recent follow up report to the SSCB shows progress in promoting and raising awareness of the private fostering arrangements demonstrated by identifying and providing services for six children and secure arrangements to ensure that appropriate services are made available.

Quality of provision

Grade 3 (Adequate)

23. The quality of provision is adequate. The quality of provision has been a major area for improvement and following a detailed assessment of the needs of children, young people and their families, the range and scope of early preventative services have been reviewed. Gaps in services have been identified and work is underway to re-commission services to align them with priorities. Some services have already been refocused and are having a positive impact in helping families tackle the complex challenges in their lives and are enabling some children and young people to remain safely in the care of their parents. For example the family intervention project and the Solutions team have been effective in a number of cases in preventing family breakdown and in securing for some young people safe living arrangements within their communities.
24. Good progress to strengthen access arrangements ensures that contacts and referrals are responded to in effective and timely ways. Contacts are well recorded and are screened promptly. Notifications of domestic violence by the Police are all screened by a multi-agency professional group to ensure appropriate and timely responses. Thresholds for progression to common or initial assessment are clear and are correctly applied by managers in the access team. Nevertheless, thresholds are still not consistently understood or applied across all referring agencies and the lack of a clear referral process and associated documentation compounds this. The current use of the common assessment framework (CAF) form as the referral tool is confusing to some partners and does not assist professionals in understanding what level of concern meets the threshold for children's social care intervention.

25. Effective joint working between the common assessment team and the access team has led to a significant increase in the use of CAF. However, despite this increase, its use is not yet embedded across all agencies and has not impacted on the numbers of children with child protection plans or the number of looked after children. The recently strengthened team is currently implementing a clear plan to tackle this issue.
26. Effective organisation and management of the duty and assessment services ensures that cases are allocated promptly for assessment following referral. The timeliness of assessments has significantly improved and is good. The quality of assessments overall is still too variable, though more recent work is indicative of an improving picture. Information is shared and discussed with other agencies and is used appropriately to inform assessments in most cases. The ethnicity of children and young people is clearly identified in case recording and, where necessary interpreters are used appropriately. Although there are some examples of account being taken of specific needs, recording does not show this consistently. Inspectors saw some good assessments which were comprehensive and clearly outlined risks and protective factors. However, with the exception of some more recent cases, the quality of analysis is not always sufficiently incisive and sometimes conclusions are reached without strong supporting evidence.
27. All children subject to child protection plans are allocated to qualified social workers. The timeliness of initial child protection conferences has improved significantly from 57.3% at the end of March 2011 to 95.8% by the end of December 2011. Children subject to child protection plans are all reviewed regularly and most are visited regularly and seen alone when this is appropriate. Good progress has been made in ensuring the views of children and young people are sought and there is increasing evidence that this informs the work to be carried out. Children and young people's participation in child protection conferences is improving from a low base and is identified as an area for further development by the council.
28. Child protection plans are of variable quality overall and not all reflect the current risks. However there is clear evidence of recent progress in new cases. These newer cases are characterised by an improved focus on outcomes which introduces a more defined purpose for the work that is required and enables progress and the impact of workers on reducing the identified risks to be assessed. These cases contrast with others where, despite considerable activity, frequent visiting, regular information sharing and involvement by key agencies at core groups and conferences, there is little evidence of improved outcomes. Reactive social work, a lack of clear contingency planning, robust managerial action and decisive decision making compounds the lack of progress.

29. The management of children in need cases is too variable and not all children and young people have plans, and where they do their purpose is insufficiently clear. Too many children in need do not have an allocated worker, instead relying on managers to monitor their progress and react to new or changing need. Home visits to these children, some of whom have identified disabilities, are not taking place regularly and overall oversight of this work is insufficiently robust and inspectors found two cases which required allocation for further work. Steps are now being taken to review this situation and additional staff are being recruited to enable work with the families to progress.
30. Records are generally up to date and in some cases these are clear and detailed and demonstrate outcome focused work of good quality. However overall, records are not consistently evaluative. When cases are initially allocated management guidance is usually thorough providing clear direction for social workers. There is evidence of management decisions and case supervision on files but in some cases there are gaps in managerial overview and the quality of decision making is not sufficiently robust.

Ambition and prioritisation

Grade 3 (Adequate)

31. Ambition and prioritisation are adequate. The local authority and its partners have worked to achieve a common understanding of their ambition for children and young people. These and their associated priorities are securely located in the improvement plan and are satisfactory. Recent strengthening of arrangements have spread the awareness of the partnership role and achieved greater engagement. Political understanding is strong and the active cabinet member is an experienced politician with an acute awareness of the need to never lose sight of the focus upon children.

Leadership and management

Grade 3 (Adequate)

32. Leadership and management across the council and its partners have been strengthened throughout the most recent 12 months and are now adequate. Workforce planning has been a strong feature of the improvement process. Combining job relevant training and development opportunity with robust human resource (HR) action ensures that weaknesses are quickly identified and rigorous action has been, and is still being taken to secure a workforce of the right size and expertise. Underperformance, absence, sickness and over reliance upon agency staff to fill vacancies have been identified as major contributory factors affecting the quality of services. Each has been tackled and some improvements have been achieved, for example at senior management and social worker levels. However some key vacancies are proving difficult to fill (particularly at team leader levels where financial incentives are now

being made available to attract suitable candidates) and performance of some staff and managers is not yet sufficiently consistent or managed appropriately.

33. Revised appraisal arrangements to underpin an annual training and development needs analysis have been introduced but do not yet directly inform the current training and development offer. Supervision arrangements for front line staff have been defined clearly and accompanied by formal training but Inspectors' examination of case files and the council's own audit shows variability in frequency and quality. Inspectors found evidence that supervision is still not consistently helping social workers to understand the needs of the case and in some cases promptly identify safeguarding concerns. Good progress has been made in recruiting newly qualified social workers who reported very positively about the level of support, including management support, they have received and their protected caseloads. The work of the manager who fulfils a coordinating role overseeing the learning and development of new staff is effective. In addition the study days and action learning sets that are central to their induction are very positive contributions to their development and have contributed to the council's success in retaining them.
34. Satisfactory progress is now being made in increasing the participation of children and young people in all aspects of the safeguarding and child protection process. Children and young people are increasingly attending child protection review conferences and advocacy is available to them though currently under used. Good efforts to engage parents and carers are resulting in improved attendance at child protection conferences, core group and child in need meetings. Overall participation by mothers in child protection planning processes is good but participation of fathers is not yet well established. The council has made good progress in actively seeking feedback from parents on their experiences to inform improvements and young people are actively involved in the selection and appointment of senior staff in social care. Children and young people with disabilities have recently attend the SSCB to discuss how they are to continue to be involved in Quality of Life Audits, a person centred way of checking people's quality of life in residential homes, day services, short breaks and health provision.
35. The council has taken strong action to protect safeguarding services from funding reductions and provided some additional investment to support the development programme. Work continues to re-commission early help and preventative services to enable more effective and targeted work to be undertaken with children in need with a longer term goal of reducing the need for child protection and 'in care' services.
36. The improvement plan is being delivered against a backcloth of significant increases in demand for services and unallocated children in need cases.

Social workers holding full and complex caseloads indicate that capacity to undertake additional work is at best marginal. While it is good that managers have taken the decision to refrain from allocating these cases to social workers who are already working to capacity, the current arrangements to manage and take decisions about the needs of the affected children and young people is no longer sustainable. This was illustrated by inspectors identifying cases which needed to be reallocated as a priority.

Performance management and quality assurance

Grade 3 (Adequate)

37. Performance management and quality assurance are adequate. The council produces and adequately uses a wide range of performance information at all levels in the organisation and there is a clear commitment to ensure that it is fully understood and used by managers and staff throughout the service. It is used extensively by the Improvement Board, senior managers and councillors to monitor and challenge progress. Recent performance data shows clear progress against a wide range of indicators which are mostly met or exceeded, in some instances by significant amounts. Performance information also informs an establishing performance management culture at all levels in the organisation which is being developed to inform evidence based judgements and solutions. However not all managers, particularly middle and junior managers, are yet able to articulate the key issues for their service which are arising from performance data. Inspectors did see evidence of management information being used successfully to tackle underperformance using both formal and informal capability processes or the council's disciplinary code. However the value of case file and supervision audits is reduced by the absence of a suitable outcome focus which results in most concentrating on compliance with procedural requirements.
38. A range of performance information is also reported to the SSCB including the findings of some multi-agency audits. However it does not receive reports detailing the themes and issues which arise from single agency audits, including those done by children's social care. The Board is not yet systematically apprised of all key data held by individual agencies, which further compromises its ability to evaluate the overall quality of safeguarding practice and, therefore, its professional leadership role. However the chair fully recognises the need to strengthen the Board's challenge function and work is continuing to re-define expectations and roles.
39. The capacity of child protection conference chairs has recently been strengthened in recognition of increased demand. However their role beyond chairing responsibilities is underdeveloped although recent steps

have been taken to strengthen their ability to quality assure child protection plans.

Partnership working

Grade 3 (Adequate)

40. Partnership working and communication at all levels including across the voluntary and community services is adequate. The SSCB discharges its statutory duties appropriately although an annual report on the activity of the LADO has not been presented for 2010/11. All key agencies are represented on the Board at a sufficiently senior level to enable decisions to be taken and agencies to hold each other to account for actions but despite efforts to recruit, the continued absence of a permanent business manager to the board is impeding its efficiency. The new independent chair has a depth of knowledge and experience in safeguarding and provides effective and confident leadership and this is helping the board to develop. The revised business plan is more robust than the previous version and is now focused well on the board's key priorities which reflect appropriately key elements of the improvement plan.
41. The Children's Trust is established with appropriate representation and has over the last year complemented the work of the Improvement Board by focusing its efforts on developing the concept of early help across the borough. As part of this work it has been instrumental in developing, in conjunction with large numbers of local children and young people, a clear statement of values which will underpin the aims of all future services that are to be made available. However partners anticipate that the Health and Well-being Board currently in development will absorb the current responsibilities of the Children's Trust and discharge them through a new strategic sub-group, a development that is consistent with the recommendations of the council's review of governance arrangements.
42. Satisfactory and developing working relationships are in place with the independent sector to ensure that a suitable range of services are available for children and young people. Services are provided within a revised process which enables a sufficiently flexible response to requests for new services to meet demand through commissioning or, where appropriate, through creating capacity by decommissioning. For example gaps in domestic violence services for male perpetrators that were recognised by the relevant strategic partnership resulted in a successful bid for funds for a voluntary sector run service. This bid was made using the revised commissioning arrangements which have been received well with the reasoning behind the new processes clearly understood.

Record of main findings:

| Safeguarding services | |
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| Overall effectiveness | Adequate |
| Capacity for improvement | Adequate |
| Safeguarding outcomes for children and young people | |
| Children and young people are safe and feel safe | Adequate |
| Quality of provision | Adequate |
| Ambition and prioritisation | Adequate |
| Leadership and management | Adequate |
| Performance management and quality assurance | Adequate |
| Partnership working | Adequate |
| Equality and diversity | Adequate |