

Inspection of looked after children services

Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council

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Reporting inspector: Christopher Sands HMI

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About this inspection

1. The purpose of the inspection is to evaluate the contribution made by relevant services to the quality of service provision for looked after children and care leavers. The inspection team consisted of five of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI). The inspection was carried out under section 136 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006
2. The evidence evaluated by inspectors included:
 - discussions with children and young people receiving services, front line staff and managers, parents and carers, senior officers including the Director of Children's Services, the Chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board and professionals in their capacity as corporate parents
 - analysing and evaluating reports from a variety of sources including a review of the Improvement Plan, performance data, information from the inspection of fostering and adoption inspections
 - a review of 57 case files and 12 recent health assessments 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

The inspection judgements and what they mean

3. 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

4. Sandwell is located to the west of Birmingham and shares its borders with Birmingham, Dudley, Wolverhampton and Walsall. West Bromwich is the largest town in the borough. In March 2011, the National Census recorded that there were 309,042 people in Sandwell. Of these, 74,641 were children (24% of the total population). This is a slightly higher percentage than that of the England average (21%).
5. According to the 2011 National Census, Sandwell's population was 70% white, compared with the England figure of 86%. The largest Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups were Indian (10%) and Pakistani (5%). In January 2012, almost half of all Sandwell's children in state-funded primary schools were BME (49%). The England figure was 28%. 141 languages are spoken by pupils in its schools. The most common are English (74%), Punjabi (9%), Urdu (4%) and Bengali (4%).
6. The Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index 2011 rank for Sandwell is 26 (152 being the least deprived). This means that Sandwell is in the most deprived quartile of councils. According to the group End Child Poverty, in 2011 31% of children in Sandwell lived in families on out-of-work benefits. The England figure was 21%.
7. The proportion of pupils in the borough eligible for free school meals is above the national averages with 24% in primary schools and 23% in secondary schools eligible. This compares with national averages of 18% and 15% respectively. The proportion of pupils with English as an additional language is above the national figures with 30% in primary and 23% in secondary schools. This compares with national averages of 12% and 11% respectively.
8. At the time of the inspection, 606 children and young people were being looked after by the council. They comprise 166 children under five years of age, 390 children of school age (5-16) and 98 post-16 young people. There were 164 care leavers (18-24). The council currently has 191 fostering households, including kinship and short break foster carers. Residential care is currently provided through Sandwell's own home, Spon Lane. There were 34 looked after children placed across various external residential providers. Of those children placed in either fostering or residential provision, 53% are placed outside the local authority area.
9. Services for looked after children and care leavers are provided by five care management teams (where a child has been receiving a service as a child in need or a child with a child protection plan previously), four looked after children and young people teams, a family placement service which includes three fostering teams, one adoption team and one children's home. Services for care leavers are provided through the multi-agency targeted youth support service. The family nurse partnership and the

young parents' children's centre prioritise support to looked after young people who become parents. Support to their children is also provided from this service.

10. Looked after children who have enduring or complex mental health difficulties are supported by the Child and Adolescent Mental Health service (CAMHS). Sandwell Shield provides emotional wellbeing support (level 2/3) for children over the age of ten, including looked after children and young people who have left care, up to age 25.
11. Health services for looked after young people and care leavers is provided by three principal organisations. The Sandwell and West Birmingham Clinical Commissioning Group provide a designated doctor for looked after children, a designated nurse for looked after children, a lead nurse for children placed externally and a lead nurse for children and young people in care. Sandwell and West Birmingham NHS Trust provides health visitors and school health nurses and the Black Country Partnership Foundation Trust provides the CAMHS Service.
12. The Looked After Children Board comprises a group of young people from within the care system who represent their peers, with a view to making improvements and influencing decisions that affect them.

Overall effectiveness of services for looked after children and young people

Grade 4 (Inadequate)

13. Overall effectiveness for looked after children is inadequate. The council is in the early stages of implementing a revised and reinvigorated improvement plan which is beginning to show some evidence of improved practice. However, too many children and young people are not yet receiving an adequate service as a result of a combination of some critical service failures and poor practice. For example, the weaknesses in the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) service, the quality of practice leading to too many children's needs not being sufficiently assessed, the lack of care plans for a significant number of children and young people, insufficiently robust supervision and poor take up of training for social care staff.
14. The Independent Reviewing Officer service is ineffective. The council is fully aware of this and has already taken some steps to address a number of issues through increased staffing and improved performance monitoring arrangements. However, whilst improvements are taking place, the weaknesses have resulted in too many children and young people not having up to date care plans leading, in some cases, to drift and delay.
15. Despite the deficits in the IRO service and some practice standards, outcomes for looked after children and young people, some of which are delivered by other parts of children's services and with other agencies, are adequate overall. For example, looked after young people are making good educational progress and attainment at key stage 4 and the number of looked after young people in the criminal justice system has been consistently low. Robust systems are also in place to track and monitor young people who go missing and/or are at risk of sexual exploitation.
16. The targeted approach to reducing time spent in legal proceedings is proving successful and there is a high number of looked after children being placed for adoption. For those children and young people who currently require a placement in care, assessments are now being completed and care plans are in place. There is evidence in current practice of early identification and robust planning for young children for whom permanency is required and a more active approach is being taken to revoke care orders for children placed at home. However, the pace of improvement in the quality of practice and management oversight has been too slow to address the deficits for some children and young people.
17. The partnership's revised improvement plan is comprehensive and, notwithstanding the current inadequacies within the service, demonstrates that satisfactory progress is being made within the short timeframe since

the plan has been implemented. The plan clearly addresses the deficits identified through a thorough diagnostics exercise which was completed with strategic partners combined with past inspections and intelligence. Areas for improvement are clearly articulated within the improvement plan which focuses strongly on establishing a strong and permanent leadership structure, robust governance and improving the quality of practice and planning.

18. Since the child protection inspection in February 2013, an extensive performance framework has been introduced which is designed to monitor key activity within specific services. Divisional managers now take full accountability for service performance with poor practice challenged through monthly practice surgeries. Additionally, the workforce development plan as part of the 'stable and high performing workforce' workstream and the quality assurance framework are now in place. However, whilst it is too early to demonstrate fully the effectiveness and impact of these recent initiatives, some early evidence of impact is seen in addressing the high reliance on agency staff within the service and some improvements in current practice.
19. The views of children and young people have been used well within recruitment processes and to inform and launch the revised improvement plan. The looked after children group has been active in raising issues with the corporate parenting board with some evidence of successful outcomes. However, this group is small and as such is not representative of all looked after young people who are the responsibility of the council.
20. The corporate parenting board is currently under review. Whilst board members have been gathering the views of young people through the regular attendance of the looked after children group, the board has not had a core dataset which can be used to monitor and scrutinise effectively outcomes for looked after young people. Additionally, the pledge for looked after young people is also under review due to it not being fit for purpose as it is too long and not young person friendly.
21. Advocacy arrangements are well established and commissioned from a voluntary agency with good attention being given to ensuring the voice of children with disabilities is heard. The councils own unvalidated data shows a high percentage of children and young people participate in their reviews.

Capacity to improve

Grade 3 (Adequate)

22. Capacity to improve services for looked after children is adequate. Ambition and prioritisation is clearly articulated through the improvement plan supported by specific work streams and a robust mechanism of

reporting. The decision to undertake wholesale and fundamental change rather than address individual aspects in a piecemeal approach is a pragmatic and absolute necessity and addresses one of the reasons for successive past failings. The design of the improvement process and the partnership approach with two agencies independent of the council is firmly based on the critical need to achieve sustainable improvements within a specified timescale.

23. The needs of looked after young people are included within the agendas of the Sandwell Safeguarding Children Board, the Children's Strategic Partnership and the Health and Wellbeing Board. However, a greater focus and co-ordination is required particularly by the health and wellbeing board and the safeguarding children board.
24. Through experience, learning and the comprehensive diagnostics activity undertaken by the strategic partners, the council has a heightened awareness and very clear understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. During the inspection, there were no areas of concern identified about which the council was not aware. A firm foundation has now been built upon on which to drive forward the critical and widespread changes required within the children's services to improve the quality of practice.
25. Senior managers have now been appointed to permanent posts following a rigorous process of recruitment and will be in post within the next two months. The looked after children's service is now supported with a permanent divisional manager. The impact of this appointment is beginning to show some improvements in practice. The council acknowledge that the use of agency staff remains too high and active recruitment is attracting an increasing number of applicants for permanent posts.
26. A number of practice areas identified during this inspection are ones which relate to basic practice standards that had already been identified by the council and do not require the need to await structural change to improve. Whilst there are some improvements demonstrated, as evidenced in current practice, the council acknowledges that the pace of improvement in practice has been too slow and has potentially left too many children and young people to suffer from drift and delay in their care planning arrangements.
27. The voice and journey of the child is an integral aspect to the improvement plan. Some measurements of success are based on gaining the views of young people and carers about their services and comparing these to the council's success criteria. To inform the improvement plan, young people have been consulted about the service they receive and responses have been used to inform the improvement plan. From this, the children's champion group has been formed. The looked after children group is an active, yet small group of very committed young people who

represent the voice of young people looked after through the corporate parenting group.

Areas for improvement

28. In order to improve the quality of provision and services for looked after children and young people in Sandwell, the local authority should take the following action.

Immediately:

- Ensure that a clear plan is in place to improve the effectiveness of the Independent Reviewing Officers service which results in a robust reviewing practice through which the statutory functions of the service are rigorously applied and which support practice improvements
- Ensure plans are in place for accelerated improvements in the completion and quality of care plans and assessments and that the voice of children and young people is strongly evidenced within these
- Ensure plans are in place to address the delay in looked after children review minutes being made available and placed on the electronic records
- Review all children on care orders placed at home with parents to identify those for whom revocation orders can be appropriately applied and that these are rigorously monitored to prevent drift and delay
- Ensure plans are in place for every child on a care order placed at home with parents so that they are placed in accordance with regulations with robust plans for revocation as appropriate
- Ensure that plans are firmly in place to eliminate the backlog of initial health assessments for children and young people coming into care
- Ensure plans are in place to improve the quality of initial and review health assessments to ensure that these include the fullest information obtainable to inform the comprehensive health needs of looked after young people
- Review the current policy for supporting young people preparing for university to ensure that some groups are not disadvantaged by the recently introduced policy change

Within three months:

- Ensure the consistently high quality of PEPs through the rigorous application of a quality assurance mechanism
- Ensure that the LACE Virtual School establishes a robust system for systematic tracking overall of attainment and analysis which can be used to drive forward outcomes and further narrow the gap between looked after young people and their peers
- Ensure that the corporate parenting board agrees a core dataset upon which to monitor and scrutinise outcomes effectively for looked after children and young people
- Ensure that the revised pledge is completed and is well publicised amongst children and young people, staff and corporate parents
- Ensure that plans are in place to develop consistent transition planning for looked after children and young people with disabilities
- Ensure training opportunities and attendance at courses are made available for staff within the looked after teams working with children with disabilities so that individual young people's needs can be met more effectively through informed practice
- Ensure the supervision policy is applied consistently and that supervision clearly records details of actions agreed, supported by timescales, and demonstrates discussions and challenge to progress being made to improve outcomes identified within care plans
- Ensure that a clear memorandum of roles and responsibilities is in place between the SSCB, the Improvement Board and the Health and Wellbeing Board which promotes complementary oversight and monitoring of looked after children and young people and reduces duplication

Within six months:

- Ensure that the looked after children group becomes more representative of all looked after children and young people
- Review the functionality of the electronic social care recording system to inform system developments which make the system more efficient and reduces the opportunities for casework to be saved in different files

Outcomes for looked after children and young people

Grade 3 (Adequate)

29. Outcomes for looked after children and young people are adequate. Whilst too many children and young people have suffered drift and delay due to poor planning, other parts of children's services and partner agencies are contributing to improved outcomes. A multi-agency placement panel monitors the placements of looked after children and young people to ensure that placements continue to meet their identified needs. Where placements have been commissioned externally, the External Placements Panel (EPP) reviews all placements commissioned outside the council's provision to ensure that they continue to keep children safe and are offering the local authority value for money. Children are looked after only in placements that have been judged by Ofsted to be at least adequate with active monitoring to identify any judgement changes.
30. Sandwell looked after children and young people who go missing or are absent are effectively safeguarded. Procedures for reporting looked after children who go missing are well established. National guidance for tracing children who go absent or missing is implemented across the partnership. Outcomes are tracked through the Sandwell Safeguarding Children Board young people at risk of sexual exploitation and missing multi-agency group. An independent person, currently funded by the Board, offers 'return interviews' in line with guidance and valuable intelligence to identify other young people who may be at risk is gathered and followed up consistently.
31. Good support is available for looked after children and care leavers who offend or are at risk of offending through the multi-agency Targeted Youth Service (TYS). Youth offending services and specialist police and probation workers are fully integrated into the YYS and 18+ leaving care support. Figures demonstrate comparatively low and reducing levels of LAC offending. Overall, looked after young people are a small group in a diversionary system, which is nationally recognised as good practice.
32. Looked after young people are supported well when they are at risk of offending. The multi-agency approach is very successful in reducing entrants, including looked after young people, to the criminal justice system. Risk assessments (which for looked after young people take into account their care status and needs) completed by the police are taken to the multi-agency diversionary panel which frequently results in appropriate alternative to custody arrangements being put into place.
33. A variety of provision is available through specialist and targeted services to meet the health needs of looked after young people. In particular, the

child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) provides time limited therapeutic interventions which are reported by team managers to add considerable value to casework and outcomes for young people. However, given the number of looked after young people requiring the service, the demands of the work mean that CAMHS workers are unable at times to take on additional work and some children and young people have to wait for the service.

34. Initial health assessments are undertaken by the designated doctor for looked after children and young people at a clinic that is child friendly with private facilities for birth families. Subsequent health assessments are held at the child's placement. The appointment of a designated looked after children nurse specifically for external placements is a positive move to contribute to improving health outcomes for these children. The LAC nurse manager is a budget holder and this enables a responsive service for purchasing specific resources for individual children.
35. Information from case tracking, audit and discussions with staff has highlighted that some initial health assessments are not timely with some very young children waiting up to three months from their date of placement. A joint Children's Services and Health electronic system to track all LAC health assessments is being implemented. The quality of health assessments sampled was variable and lacked action planning. In some cases tracked, the information was too brief and it is unlikely that assessments could be used effectively to inform care plans.
36. Some young people leaving care do not attend a transition health assessment so that key workers do not always know young people's needs until they get to know them well. For older looked after children there is insufficient detail of young peoples' health needs in pathway and transition plans.
37. Looked after young people are supported well by the Looked after Children Education (LACE) virtual school. Good progress is made from their starting points which are monitored in their individual schools and by the LACE team. The tracking that is in place allows the Virtual School to identify and put in resources tailored to individual needs. The attainment of looked after young people in GCSEs at Key Stage 4 is above the national average, although children at Key Stage 2 are not attaining the levels found among looked after children of comparable ages elsewhere nationally.
38. The inspection noted and the council is aware that whilst there are 100% tracking returns for children in Sandwell schools, the virtual school has not progressed sufficiently in their need to track and analyse data for those children placed in schools outside the local authority, to drive outcomes to good overall. Whilst there is an action plan in place, this does not support timely improvement due to an absence of measurable timescales.

39. The LACE Virtual School provides good support to social workers and foster carers to ensure that children can access and stay in the best possible education for their needs. Parents and carers commented that the LACE service has a positive impact on educational attainment for children and young people. For example, they provide individual tuition and mentoring which has a positive impact on outcomes. Of the thirteen young people who responded to the inspection survey about their education, the majority considered their education to be good or very good. Similarly, the vast majority felt they were getting either all or most of the help they needed with their education.
40. The Virtual School provides appropriate guidance, training and support to schools to help them to draw up personal educational plans (PEPs) when children become looked after or are placed in a new school. However, although the Virtual School has implemented a quality assurance mechanism for PEPs, whilst some plans are good or have good elements, inspectors found that the quality was still too inconsistent.
41. No looked after children have been permanently excluded from schools during the past three years. When looked after children are excluded for fixed terms from both Sandwell schools and other schools in adjacent council areas, a prompt response ensures that they are immediately provided with alternative education.
42. Attendance of looked after children at school has improved consistently over a three year period. The attendance of children placed in foster care is very good and the rate of absence overall is lower than the national average. A commissioned voluntary sector provider supports the participation of pupils who are at risk of missing education and enriches recreational learning for looked after children. The service also provides a summer school for years 6 & 7 vulnerable pupils to assist them in making a positive transition to secondary school.
43. Care leavers who remain in contact with the Targeted Youth Support and 18+ services have good support in following their choices in further and higher education, training and employment. The figures for care leavers overall in employment, education and training compare favourably to similar areas. Action has been successfully taken to develop apprenticeships within council services. Creative use of the substance misuse grant has enabled two care leavers to take up apprenticeships within the substance misuse service and this has led to positive outcomes.
44. Care leavers are supported appropriately at university although the support available has recently been redefined to ensure maximum advantage is made of existing funding streams, i.e. bursaries and loans. However, there appears to be a group of young people who are already preparing for university who are being financially disadvantaged through the recent change in policy.

45. Although written pathway planning has been cursory and is not valued by care leavers whom inspectors met, young people are managing and moving on positively in their transition to adulthood. Care leavers are supported well to find suitable accommodation that meets their needs, enables them to stay in education or at work and in many cases, to maintain positive relationships in the area.
46. The looked after children group, whilst small, is effective in raising issues with the corporate parenting board and is well engaged in a number of local and national initiatives. However, due to its size, the group is not sufficiently representative of all looked after young people. Whilst there has been a clear communication channel for looked after young people's voices to be heard by elected members and senior leaders through the corporate parenting board, young people on the group do not feel that they receive sufficient responses to some of their issues raised.
47. The pledge for looked after children and young people is currently being revised. Out of thirteen looked after young people who responded in the inspection survey to a question about the pledge, 10 had not heard of it, suggesting that increased marketing of the pledge is required when it is available.
48. A positive approach to promoting looked after young people's engagement in leisure activities is demonstrated by the provision of free leisure passes. Young people interviewed by inspectors reported positively on this and made good use of the facilities.

Quality of provision

Grade 4 (Inadequate)

49. The quality of provision for looked after children and young people is inadequate. The arrangements for placing children who come into care have been insufficiently rigorous. This is now being effectively tackled by the recently established multi-agency placements panel. The introduction of the panel has ensured that the threshold for a child or young person becoming looked after is consistent and that the process for requesting a care placement is coherent and streamlined to meet the individual needs of the child or young person.
50. Until recently, care plans on too many files of looked after children and young people have been out of date or in some cases absent. A review of the care plan format which now includes the plan for permanence and a concerted effort by managers of the looked after children service, has resulted in increasing numbers of care plans being seen on file. However, the completion of care plans remains inconsistent, some care plans seen were overly descriptive of current circumstances with others inappropriately brief. In some other cases, social workers had used the

planning template to produce bullet pointed lists of tasks, with the timescales set out to implement the plan in a timely manner. However, overall, there is insufficient use of care plans to co-ordinate and deliver outcome-based services for looked after children and young people. Transition planning processes are underdeveloped to ensure proactive planning for children with disabilities who are looked after.

51. Core assessments have not been routinely undertaken prior to or immediately following a child becoming looked after. This means that some children and young people who have become looked after have not had a comprehensive assessment of their needs and therefore, the matching of placements has not been based on a coherent needs assessment. However, on more recent cases seen, which have been presented to the placement panel, assessments are routinely in evidence and all seen by inspectors were of at least a satisfactory quality.
52. The updating of assessments is not routine practice. Several examples were seen where assessments of the needs of a looked after child or young person were significantly out of date. In contrast, other examples were seen of appropriate use of reassessment which had resulted in a change of plan and direction.
53. The quality of assessments seen by inspectors demonstrated variability, particularly when focusing upon equality and diversity. Overall, there is limited evidence of the individual identity and voice of the child within written assessments. A number of children from black and minority ethnic origins have been matched with culturally appropriate carers on the basis of a sound assessment of their cultural needs. This is in part due to well-targeted recruitment of foster carers by the council's fostering service amongst the borough's minority ethnic communities. However, other children, particularly those with a disability, are not always the subject of thorough assessments that give full consideration to their special needs. Senior managers are aware of this gap in social workers' expertise and intend to address it through service redesign and training. New carers are not always given accurate placement information records from which they can establish the looked after child's routine.
54. The IRO service does not meet its duties under care planning regulations. While the vast majority of reviews are held within timescales and most young people participate in their reviews, the service is not rigorous enough in exercising its wider statutory responsibilities. There is little sense from children's files of IROs actively engaging either with looked after children and young people or their social workers between reviews to check on the progress of care plans.
55. In too many cases, records of the review do not appear promptly on the child's file. Inspectors saw delays of up to seven months. This is a serious omission, as the decisions and recommendations of reviews are the means

by which the targets to deliver care plans are set and subsequently monitored and this can lead to drift and delay in care planning.

56. With the number of temporary staff within the children's services currently, combined with the known weaknesses in the quality of practice, the role of the IRO is even more critical in maintaining consistent oversight of case work and planning progress. The inspection survey of looked after young people revealed that, out of 13 responses, nine looked after young people either did not know or were not sure how to get in touch with their IRO.
57. The review format has recently been revised and some evidence was seen of its effective implementation. However, even under the revised format, too many examples were seen of poorly recorded review meetings that failed to drive the care plan forward. Recent examples were seen of IROs using the disputes resolution process effectively, but this is not yet consistent or embedded. IROs spoken to by inspectors said that high workloads prevented them from fully complying with regulations. Senior managers are aware of this deficit and have very recently put extra resources in place to reduce IRO caseloads and improve the performance of the IRO service, although the impact of this is yet to be seen.
58. The council's own data for April 2013 shows that less than half of permanency plans were in place at the second review. Plans for permanence are now set by placement planning meetings, chaired by team managers. Several examples were seen by inspectors of recent care plans that were appropriately pursuing a twin or triple track approach to achieving permanent outcomes for looked after children or young people, pursued through reunification, adoption or a viability assessment of connected persons.
59. At the time of the inspection, 38 children subject to a care order were placed at home under placement with parents arrangements. In a sample of these, there was clear evidence of drift where such arrangements had been continuing for an unacceptable extended period of time, up to seven years in one case. In the majority of the sample, risk assessments and agreements with parents were not evident on the file records. Within the cases seen by inspectors, young people were placed appropriately at home and revocation plans are in place but there is still a lack of urgency in some cases. However, recent practice in cases seen shows a significant improvement in taking forward this work.
60. Some looked after young people experience long delays in planned outcomes being achieved. Serious and significant drift in care planning is exacerbated by frequent changes of social worker, both in terms of workflow and reliance on agency social workers. Notwithstanding these issues, examples were seen by inspectors where children had been allocated to a substantive social worker for a prolonged period, yet this

had not resulted in the completion of a care or pathway plan, despite the case having been reviewed sometimes more than once, and the social worker being regularly supervised. The current management team is aware of this deficit and have taken appropriate steps to address it although the issue is not yet fully resolved.

61. Whilst the long term stability of placements for young people looked after compares favourably with statistical neighbours, monitoring by the council of current data demonstrates that placement moves is an area for improvement. The multi-agency placements panel now monitors all placements and, where a placement is considered to be at risk of breakdown, the panel ensures that additional resources are made available, such as the placement support workers based within the fostering service. Early evidence of impact of the panel is seen in the reduction of the percentage of young people experiencing three or more moves. This service is also available to support externally commissioned placements. Out of 12 young people responding to the inspection survey question about placement moves, the vast majority reported that their last move was in their best interests.
62. Too many looked after children and young people experience frequent changes of social worker. Some examples were seen of social workers who had been allocated to looked after young people for lengthy periods and who had retained case responsibility across restructuring or promotion. However, changes of social worker too often affected the continuity of relationships, which were then often sustained by other professionals, such as experienced foster carers.
63. The quality of case recording is variable and is not assisted by an electronic recording system which does not support efficient working or access to records. Records can be held in three places and leads to delays in some important documents not being placed on the correct part of the system and therefore not being readily accessible. Gaps in recording were identified by inspectors tracking cases. Some examples were seen by inspectors of cases that had been allocated continuously over an extended period where recording was extensive and included observations of the child in placement. This was augmented by detailed observations of supervised contact, which had taken place over a lengthy period due to court delays, and together these case notes resulted in a comprehensively recorded overview of the child's journey. On other case files, recording is insufficiently brief and it is not focussed on the purpose of the intervention.

Leadership and management

Grade 4 (Inadequate)

64. Leadership and management of the looked after children service is inadequate. Too many looked after children and young people are not yet receiving an adequate service. Internal audit activity undertaken during the past year and presented to the improvement board in December 2012, clearly identified some significant areas of concern in practice. Whilst current practice is showing some improvements, there has been insufficient progress made to date to address these. In particular, the ineffectiveness of the IRO service is a critical aspect which has shown little evidence of improvement. This has resulted in some children and young people suffering from drift and delay and their needs not being adequately met. However, some parts of the children's services and partnership work are contributing to adequate outcomes overall.
65. Senior management arrangements in Sandwell have been changeable and inconsistent, with several variations in senior leadership over the years. In order to address the known service deficits and to promote sustained improvement, the council took the innovative decision to enter into a strategic partnership to achieve sustainable improvement, clarity, drive and consistency in the functioning of services to children.
66. Following a procurement process, the council entered a strategic partnership with two private providers who are commissioned through a three year contract to 'lift' Sandwell out of inadequacy and to improve services to a good standard. The contract commenced in January 2013, led by an experienced director of children's services. A revised comprehensive improvement plan has been augmented by the findings and recommendations of an Ofsted inspection in April 2013, which found child protection services to be inadequate.
67. Since the inception of the strategic partnership, considerable activity has been undertaken to recast the improvement plan into clear workstreams, and to launch the change management agenda to deliver it. Partnership and corporate council working has been strengthened through the Improvement Board, which formally oversees the implementation of the improvement plan supported by dedicated work streams. The extensive change required has resulted in the need for a whole service review, a pragmatic approach borne of necessity. Several groups of staff, but not all, spoken to during the inspection feel well briefed on the changes required through a series of staff workshops. They appreciate therefore that it is a whole system approach and not a 'quick fix' that is being implemented.
68. It is clear that the emphasis of improvement work so far has been on developing the framework for change and that staff have yet to experience the full impact of the structural and cultural changes required. Managers of the Looked after Children service interviewed by inspectors,

demonstrated a clear understanding of the change agenda, and were able to describe a range of ways in which they were improving the service pending service redesign. Appointing permanent staff to senior management posts on which to drive forward the extensive change programme has been a key priority. However, whilst recruitment to senior posts has been successful, postholders will not be taking up their positions until September.

69. The Sandwell Safeguarding Children Board (SSCB) has recently been re-established following a recommendation of the last Ofsted inspection, and is now increasing its focus on the standard of safeguarding practice with looked after young people. The SSCB currently receives reports concerning looked after young people, for example an annual report on health provision for looked after young people and more recently has started to receive reports from the looked after children service divisional manager.
70. The SSCB board chair acknowledges further work is required to maintain a consistent oversight of issues relevant to looked after children and safeguarding to increase the prominence of this group of young people within the board's activities. This is appropriately included within the current SSCB business plan and is work in progress. An 'assurance report' of the safety of looked after children has been requested from the service and is in the process of being written. Additionally, the board has a robust system of serious concerns reporting which has included looked after young people whose cases have been subject to multi-agency reviews.
71. The Health and Wellbeing Strategy is predominantly health orientated. Whilst some actions which relate to looked after young people are included, these are insufficiently focused and too limited. Due to the number of key strategic and monitoring boards, i.e. the Improvement Board, the SSCB and the Health and Wellbeing Board, there is a need for a clear memorandum of understanding relating to roles and responsibilities to avoid duplicating activity.
72. Within a challenging financial climate, strong commitment is demonstrated by elected members to supporting the necessary changes to children's services to improve outcomes. An active and keen oversight is being demonstrated by the recently appointed lead member who has taken up the post and associated responsibilities with energy and enthusiasm, visiting services in order to hear from staff and understand fully the work they undertake.
73. The Corporate Parenting Board is currently under review to ensure the new board has improved oversight of issues affecting looked after young people and care leavers. The board has been meeting regularly with the looked after children group. However, the board does not have a core dataset for regular monitoring of performance and outcomes for looked after young people and care leavers. The commitment to maintain a

corporate parenting group is clearly articulated. However, there is no formal training currently for elected members to support them to carry out their corporate parenting roles and responsibilities.

74. A newly developed and comprehensive performance framework is currently being implemented. This draws together into a single framework a number of performance management processes that previously existed but in isolation, such as performance reports and thematic audits. Performance is now overseen by a Performance Board, chaired by the director of children's services and attended by divisional managers, who each receive their section's performance data in advance of Board meetings and prepare detailed 'scorecards' to be presented to the Board, telling the story underlying the figures. Divisional managers are expected to be accountable, and take responsibility for addressing deficits in performance. One early impact of this monitoring is seen in the increase, from a low base, in the completion of care plans although too many young people have not got permanency plans.
75. Audits are now to be used as a means of dip sampling 'hotspots' identified by the data and analysing the quality of the service being provided. Issues will be taken to regular performance surgeries chaired by the divisional managers of their management teams. There is, as yet therefore, no sustained evidence of impact from this evidently improved means of managing, challenging and improving performance.
76. Performance reporting is a strength of the council. Comprehensive performance reports are produced by a dedicated data management team and some evidence was seen of their effective use. For example, the trends analysis on children and young people looked after has been used effectively to inform the comprehensive placement strategy which fully addresses the council's sufficiency responsibilities.
77. Supervision is insufficiently rigorous overall, with a lack of evidence of individual performance management, insufficient oversight of the quality of practice and tracking to ensure that statutory responsibilities are being met. Supervision records are generally focused on an update of a case rather than demonstrating a strong focus on progress and action planning to ensure that practice deficits are being addressed. Little evidence was seen of reflective supervision in line with the Munro review recommendations which post-dates the policy. The supervision policy has been in place for three years and sets down the expected frequency, focus and characteristics of the supervisory relationship together with how it will be recorded. However, staff interviewed by inspectors found delivery of the policy and the regularity of supervision to be variable. This is supported by the inconsistency of management decision making, recorded on the electronic recording system.

78. The Placement Panel is improving the market intelligence available to the commissioning process and the detailed Placement Strategy has recently been developed to meet the council's sufficiency requirements. This replaces previously ad hoc methods of commissioning placements but has yet to deliver its full impact. Joint commissioning and funding of care placements is currently undertaken on a case by case basis and placements are only commissioned externally where there is no appropriate in house resource to meet the child's needs.
79. Historically, the need to use independent provider placements has occurred quite frequently and resulted in relatively high numbers of children and young people being looked after in placements external to the council's own provision that are high cost and often located at a distance from the borough, adding hidden costs to the placement such as social workers' travel time. However, improved commissioning arrangements and a recent increase in recruiting foster carers means that of those young people newly looked after in the year ending 31 March 2013 and still looked after, only eight out of 149 were placed more than 20 miles from their address.
80. Some examples were seen by inspectors of well-informed commissioning for children on the edges of care, such as the effective use of 'ending gang related violence' monies by the partnership delivering the diversionary approach to youth justice. The partnership commissioned the local Voluntary Community Services through a collaborative commissioning approach, to enable existing small voluntary organisations to provide a range of services to vulnerable groups, including young people at the edges of care. Where young people come to the attention of the diversionary panel, this commissioned activity effectively augments the services that partners are able to provide as an alternative to custody or care. Another example is the procurement exercise undertaken by CAMHS to commission a service from the voluntary sector to provide emotional wellbeing services which is also accessible by looked after young people.
81. The workforce plan is currently being delivered under a dedicated work stream of the improvement plan. The council is actively working on recruiting a permanent workforce that meets the needs of the local community and ends a longstanding reliance on agency staff. The high number of agency staff inevitably results in too many changes in social workers and in increased staffing costs which are not sustainable. The improvement plan is clearly focused on addressing this by on-going recruitment through which a good level of interest has been shown by prospective applicants.
82. As part of the work stream, the different strands of workforce development activity, which previously operated separately and lacked coherence, are now brought together into a more integrated and aligned set of processes, such as the system for booking onto training courses. Notwithstanding the considerable number of learning opportunities on

offer, poor take up of training is evidenced. Social workers spoken to by inspectors reported a lack of capacity to attend training due to pressure of work. In house training is currently being reviewed and reprioritised along a model successfully piloted, that significantly increased take-up in Adult services. This includes forums for team managers to make sure that the training on offer was the training needed and ensure buy in. However, this is work in progress and therefore it is too early to assess the impact of these changes.

83. An established advocacy service commissioned from an independent organisation is in place to strengthen the voice of children and young people. The service covers a wide age range, 0-26 years and is accessible by looked after children, young people, care leavers and other children in need. Good attention has been given within the contract to ensure that this service is available to young people placed out of the council area, regardless of distance. Additionally, the service includes a specialist disability advocate to work with children with disabilities which is improving participation for this group of young people. Monthly visits to all council looked after children and young people placed in children's homes within the council area from which issues are then progressed through the advocacy service as required. Access to interpreters and translators is available through the Councils commissioned service and also through the advocacy service. Regular contract monitoring takes place to ensure full take up of services and to identify themes being raised. However, as this contract relates to a wider group of people, in addition to looked after young people, the monitoring does not differentiate between looked after and other groups of young people.
84. The corporate complaints service has developed effective links with the advocacy service to progress issues requiring escalation. An improved system for monitoring complaints has resulted in improved performance. Using the council's own unvalidated data, response timescales for addressing complaints relating to looked after young people have improved to 50% as at April 2013. All complaints during 2012-13 have been addressed at stage one. The complaints service does not use its information to differentiate between ethnic origins and therefore currently is unable to identify any themes connected to this. A more robust system for oversight and learning from complaints is being incorporated into the performance board activity and is part of the council's performance scorecard.
85. A strength of the new approach has been the emphasis on the voice and journey of the child, and this has been put to good effect by using digital media to record the messages of looked after children and young people, and to use recordings as part of a recruitment campaign and during workshops for staff which have been badged 'big plans for little voices'.

Record of main findings

Services for looked after children

Overall effectiveness	Inadequate
Capacity to improve	Adequate
Outcomes for looked after children and young people	Adequate
Quality of provision	Inadequate
Leadership and management	Inadequate