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Mr Jim Leivers  
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Dear Mr Leivers

### **Monitoring visit to Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council Children's Services Department**

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Sandwell Children's Services on 5 and 6 September 2017. The visit was the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in February 2015. The visit was carried out by John Roughton and Karen Wareing, Her Majesty's Inspectors, and Lee-Anne Farach, Ofsted Inspector.

Until very recently, the pace of change in Sandwell has been too slow, and the local authority has made insufficient progress in improving services for the children and young people it looks after. Consequently, there are too many children looked after by Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council who are not yet receiving a service that meets their needs. Since the last monitoring visit, the local authority has invested in increasing capacity in the senior leadership team and social work establishment.

### **Areas covered by the visit**

During this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress and experiences of children looked after. Inspectors also focused on the range and choice of placements available to these children to ensure that they live with foster families, or in residential children's homes, that meet their needs and afford them the best possible outcomes. The visit also included a review of the department's self-assessment and workforce development strategy and their impact on the experiences of children looked after.

A range of evidence was considered during the visit, including case file audits, electronic case records, supervision records and observation of social workers and managers in the children looked after service areas.

## **Overview**

Since the last monitoring visit, two additional heads of service have been appointed. The appointments were made as a result of senior leaders recognising the scale of improvement needed. After a slow start, significant focus has been applied to growing the permanent workforce through a coherent and comprehensive range of recruitment and retention activities. Consequently, while caseloads still remain too high, they are continuing to reduce towards a manageable level. Social workers report being well supported by their managers, and there is now consistent evidence of regular supervision, including group supervision, and clear management oversight of social work practice.

Assessments and care plans for children looked after are of variable and often poor quality. Assessments are not routinely updated in response to children's changing circumstances. Plans are not specific enough, and do not focus on all risks, or the complexity, of a child's needs and behaviour. In particular, for too many children, permanence planning is not yet sufficiently timely or robust. Quality assurance processes are beginning to ensure that compliance with statutory requirements is improving. However, they are not yet focusing enough on the quality of social work practice to ensure that children's lives improve within appropriate timescales.

## **Findings and evaluation of progress**

Based on the evidence gathered during the visit, we identified areas of strength, areas where improvement is occurring, and some areas where we considered that the progress is not swift enough.

The local authority has established an audit framework that includes both regular, individual case and themed audits. Managers' compliance with the audit programme has improved, and over the last three months, it has been 100%. However, recommendations from audits are not always specific enough to inform social workers of the action that they need to take. The quality of some audits has been variable, and in some cases overly harsh judgements were made, which did not take into account the recent improvements in practice. Audits completed by senior managers prior to this visit were more accurate and in line with inspectors' findings. The local authority now needs to move its focus from compliance to ensuring that audits are carried out accurately, and to a consistent standard, to ensure that the right areas for improvement are identified.

Social workers are passionate about their work with children and they know them well. They recognise the efforts made to strengthen the workforce and reduce caseloads, and morale is improving. All workers, including agency staff, report good access to training and development opportunities. There is a high number of newly qualified social workers, who benefit from enhanced support through their assessed and supported year in employment and a caseload proportionate to their experience. Supervision is now happening regularly, with supervision records routinely up to date and detailed, with clear direction as to priority actions.

Appropriate and timely decisions have been made for those children who have most recently become looked after. For children who need to be looked after from birth, permanency planning is appropriately considered, and a permanence plan is in place by the second review. In all cases seen by inspectors, there is evidence of effective oversight by managers, and independent reviewing officers are ensuring the prompt progression of care plans. In most cases, an up-to-date chronology is in place, but these are not always sufficiently specific or used to adequately inform assessments and plans. When children are looked after in the context of the public law outline, the planning of legal processes is initiated at the earliest opportunity and is promptly progressed. In the majority of cases, assessments and plans are informed by timely initial health assessments.

However, the local authority is aware that significant progress is still required to be made to ensure that all children looked after are cared for according to their needs, and that plans for their future are both appropriate and robustly pursued.

- Many children who are now looked after historically experienced delay and remained in unsuitable circumstances for too long. For these children, there has been further delay in securing permanence arrangements.
- The quality of assessments is too inconsistent. Some are significantly out of date, which means that care plans are not sufficiently informed by current circumstances. Social workers are not clear about the timescales, or events, that should trigger a re-assessment.
- In the majority of children's cases, social workers do not complete direct work with children to help them understand their history and the circumstances that led to them becoming looked after. Workers are not sufficiently aware of relevant tools and techniques to support them in this work. Life-story books have not been completed for the majority of children, and those seen have been of poor quality.
- Until recently, thresholds, with respect to children becoming looked after, have not been consistently applied. Some children have remained inappropriately placed in private family arrangements for too long. Equally, some children have remained in section 20 arrangements for too long in circumstances where no one was effectively taking parental responsibility for them. These issues have now been recognised by the local authority, and a review of all children in private family arrangements and looked after under section 20 has recently begun.
- The local authority is aware that there are currently 249 children looked after with a care plan of long-term fostering which has not been through any formal approval process. Plans are in place to review all of these cases, and amend or formally ratify the care plans over the next six months.

The recently established permanence group is now monitoring and tracking all children who are looked after, to ensure that permanence is achieved in a timely way. This is not embedded yet, but thematic issues are already being identified and addressed where deficits have been found, for example in the quality of child permanence reports.

A new sufficiency strategy is now in place, focused on improving the range of local placement options for children. The local authority has a keen awareness of its current position and future needs, and has set a number of priorities for the next three years. Much of this work is only just getting under way. For example, provision of emergency residential beds and the aspiration to improve the edge-of-care service is only at a discussion stage. Too many children, therefore, continue to be placed at a distance from home.

Corporate parenting arrangements have been strengthened, with an additional two elected members having joined the corporate parenting board. The board is focused on fulfilling the council's pledge to children looked after, and it works closely with the care leavers and children looked after boards to this end. It is demonstrating improvements for children looked after and care leavers, for example in securing an exemption from council tax for care leavers, and recognising and celebrating the achievements of Sandwell's children looked after.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you and your staff for your continued positive engagement with the programme of monitoring visits. I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely,

John Roughton

**Her Majesty's Inspector**