

22 June 2018

Mr Jan Britton
Chief Executive
Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council
Council House
Oldbury
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Dear Mr Britton

Monitoring visit to Sandwell Local Authority Children's Services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Sandwell children's services on 30 and 31 May 2018. The visit was the first monitoring visit since the local authority was judged to be inadequate in January 2018. The visit was carried out by two of Her Majesty's Inspectors, Karen Wareing and Andy Waugh.

Sandwell Children's Trust was established on 1 April 2018 to provide children's services on behalf of the local authority. The Trust has brought a renewed energy and determination to improve services for children and families in the borough. Although it is too early to assess the impact of its work on social work practice, the Trust has been quick to assess the scale of change required, and work to address the legacy of poor social work practice is underway. A positive start has been made to improve services for children and young people in Sandwell.

Areas covered by the visit

During this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the areas of help and protection and children looked after, with a focus on the quality of social work assessments. Inspectors also considered the effectiveness of the performance information and quality assurance systems in supporting practice improvements.

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

Overview

Since the re-inspection in 2018, a great deal of work has been completed to establish the Sandwell Children's Trust. An ambitious improvement plan has been developed which sets out eight priority areas and with all eight priorities being led by the chief

executive and directors of the Trust. Although work has started on most of the priorities, it is significant that since the re-inspection there has been a lack of urgency to develop partnership working in the borough. This partnership working is crucial to ensure that children and families receive services to improve their outcomes.

Some long-standing barriers to improvement remain, most notably the instability of the workforce. Nearly a third of the workforce are agency or interim staff. This means that some children are having too many changes of social worker, which inhibits the development of trusting and meaningful relationships. Caseloads are too high for some workers, which means that they have insufficient time to devote to in-depth work with children. The Trust recognises that action is required to combat this and is developing a renewed offer to social workers to attract and retain staff. The Trust is also reviewing its structure and staffing levels to ensure manageable caseloads and strengthened management support. Social workers and team managers feel positive about the changes made and the introduction of the Trust. They see leaders as visible and accessible and a management grip on services is discernible.

The Trust has taken proactive steps to develop a performance and quality assurance framework. Weekly performance meetings with team managers and group heads maintain a focus on compliance and quality. Team managers and social workers are mostly positive about the ongoing scrutiny of their work and recognising the impact on children is the Trust's starting point. Leaders recognise the need to balance challenge and support to staff as they work to improve performance. Work to ensure that data is reliable is ongoing and the Trust hopes to develop a live performance dashboard to further improve the quality of information.

The Trust has been swift to act when performance data has raised concerns. For example, a sharp rise in the number of child protection investigations resulted in Sandwell's improvement partner completing diagnostic work, which led to practice changes and an appropriate reduction in numbers.

Findings and evaluation of progress

The Trust is reinforcing a culture of learning and development through its performance and quality assurance framework. It is still developing its audit tool and assessing auditors to ensure that there is a shared understanding of what constitutes good practice. Its own initial audits show that most cases are not yet good. Staff spoke positively about the new 'beyond auditing' process, whereby team members will have opportunities to develop their practice. Staff will receive in-depth feedback and guidance following the audit process to understand what they need to do to close the loop and improve their practice. In addition, learning opportunities will be enhanced with such things as 'lunch and learn' sessions devoted to key topics such as assessments, which commenced during the monitoring visit.

Assessments are not yet good. They are not routinely updated when children's circumstances change. This means that subsequent plans are made without full and up-to-date information. Although assessments contain some historical information, chronologies are not sufficiently concise and clear to present the main events in a child's life. Although the written information is not always of a good quality, social workers know their children well. Social workers report that they feel well supported by their managers and that they value supervision. Training is available, and they have access to resources to assist them in their work, for example research information.

Managers do not provide social workers with consistently clear direction and timescales to complete assessments in most cases. Although performance data shows that 86% of assessments are completed within 45 working days, managers are not setting and reviewing timescales as assessments progress. Similarly, independent reviewing officers do not challenge or escalate concerns when assessments are not completed. This means that some assessments are prolonged, leading to delays in providing services to children and families.

Although children are seen in assessments, the frequency of visits is not commensurate with the length of time taken to complete the work. In some longer assessments, children are only seen on one or two occasions and therefore opportunities to gather a richer body of evidence are missed.

The child's voice is inconsistently recorded in assessments. Direct work is not evident in all cases and some children therefore have not been helped to understand their history and circumstances.

Risks and protective factors are described well in assessments, but analysis does not thoroughly examine the impact on children. Social workers do not always exercise professional curiosity and they do not consistently challenge where there is disguised compliance. Some social workers have an over-optimistic view of parents' ability to change and, in some cases, services are repeatedly offered, and cases closed without evidence that the necessary changes have been made and sustained.

Partner agencies are mostly consulted in assessments but in some, key professionals, for example health professionals, are omitted. When professional views are sought, it is not always clear what their view is regarding the presenting concerns and what should happen next.

Some social workers make good use of research in their assessments and in most cases, they reach clear recommendations. Managers signing off assessments present a clear synopsis of the case, along with rationale for their recommendations. This demonstrates that managers have a clear understanding of the work completed by

social workers and that the right actions and services are put in place to improve children's outcomes.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you and your staff for your positive engagement with this monitoring visit. From our discussions, you have a clear understanding of the hard work required to improve services and you have made a positive start. I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Karen Wareing

Her Majesty's Inspector