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Ms Lesley Hagger
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Dear Lesley

Monitoring visit of Sandwell local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Sandwell local authority children's services on 5 and 6 September 2018. The visit was the second monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in January 2018. The inspectors were Karen Wareing, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Peter McEntee, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Sandwell Children's Trust is making some progress in improving services for children involved in the Public Law Outline (PLO) and pre-proceedings work, but overall some deficits in services remain. Senior managers and leaders understand the scale of change required and have put in place some of the foundations for social work practice to improve. It is too soon to see the impact of the recent initiatives but the continued focus on performance, quality assurance and workforce development demonstrates an improved management grip on services.

Areas covered by the visit

During this visit, inspectors reviewed progress regarding thresholds into care. Inspectors looked at the effectiveness of the PLO process and pre-proceedings work. This included decision-making and consideration of early permanence arrangements. During the visit, inspectors considered progress made against the last inspection findings.

A range of evidence was considered during the visit, including tracking of selected case files, electronic case records, supervision files and notes. Inspectors spoke to social workers and managers and observed a decision-making panel.

Overview

Senior managers in the Trust and the local authority are acutely aware of the scale of change still required to improve services for children and families in Sandwell. Progress against the improvement plan has been maintained and the newly appointed Director of Children's Services (DCS) has started the much-needed work to develop partnership working in the borough.

Senior managers and leaders continue to develop their understanding of frontline practice, through performance management, quality assurance and their direct involvement in services. The audit process has been refreshed and provides the Trust with a good understanding of the strengths and deficits of services. While more needs to be done to develop a shared understanding of 'good' practice, particularly with some frontline managers, the audits provide detailed information on compliance and quality. The moderation process effectively contributes to practice improvement and is used well to develop social workers' knowledge and skills.

Recent audit findings regarding entry to care and the PLO process have resulted in swift action to address concerns. Concise, clearly written guides and process maps have been produced to assist social workers' understanding of legal processes. A legal tracker has been implemented to monitor timescales of all children in pre-proceedings work and a Director's Resources and Decision-Making panel has been established to agree legal planning meetings, issue proceedings and all admissions to care. These very recent developments provide social workers with structure and processes in this area of practice, but it is too soon to assess their impact.

Since the last monitoring visit, the '12 reasons to work in Sandwell Children's Trust' has been developed to attract and retain staff. Since the last inspection, the combined percentage of agency and newly qualified workers has reduced from 60% to 41%, which means that there are now more permanent and experienced staff to manage complex cases. Although the number of agency staff is gradually reducing, the workforce is still fragmented, particularly in care management teams. The drive of senior managers and leaders to tackle poor performance has also resulted in the loss of some staff, and some posts are not yet filled. Caseloads have not yet reached the Trust's expectations, but direct action to review and close cases means that the overall average is reducing. Despite staff vacancies and some staff having higher than expected caseloads, social workers report that they are well supported, and they understand what leaders and managers in the Trust are trying to achieve. Staff morale is high and social workers feel that senior managers and leaders remain visible and accessible.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Drift and delay identified in the last inspection remains. For some children, there are delays in decision-making, legal planning meetings, instigating proceedings, completion of assessments and consideration of early permanence. All of these were highlighted in the last inspection.

Correct decisions are made when children become looked after. However, missed opportunities to intervene, particularly in chronic neglect cases, mean that some children still do not enter care soon enough. These children often enter care in an unplanned way due to a serious incident, rather than as a planned intervention due to ongoing concerns. The decision-making of social workers and managers in some of these cases is hampered by poor quality chronologies which do not contain full and detailed histories. Social workers are not identifying repeated patterns and trends that indicate a lack of change to improve outcomes for children.

Pre-proceedings are well used and there is evidence of regular timetabled meetings. Since the last inspection, pre-proceedings timescales have improved. Family group conferences are regularly discussed and are used to develop support or identify potential carers for children. However, legal advice is not always clear on whether the PLO process should be used or not. Minutes of legal meetings are not always clear about the outcome, which leaves social workers and parents confused about what to do next. Meetings often focus on what parents need to do without clearly demonstrating how this will impact on the child. Letters before proceedings similarly do not always explain in sufficient detail what parents need to do to change, why this will be of benefit to children or set out consequences if progress is not made. Some letters before proceedings are effective in showing the links between parents' actions and the impact on children. Inspectors saw some examples of effective social work with parents where information in letters was clear and explained thoroughly.

Senior leaders and managers have taken swift action to address the deficits in practice noted during recent audits of PLO and pre-proceedings work. A legal tracker has been developed to ensure that all children in pre-proceedings are identified and timescales are monitored. Practice guidance and process maps have also been developed to ensure that social workers are clear about their roles and responsibilities in this area of work. Some social workers spoken to by inspectors were aware of the documents available and considered them valuable. The Director's Resources and Decision-Making panel includes all group heads and representatives from legal, education and health services to oversee and agree to all legal planning, pre-proceedings work, admissions to care and any associated resources. The panel provides case scrutiny and challenge and clear recommendations regarding further action. While all of these developments are recent and too soon for inspectors to assess impact, they demonstrate an improved management grip on services.

The quality of assessments is variable. Some assessments contain detailed recording and analysis which identify and address concerns, but weaker assessments often lack thorough exploration and analysis of significant events. In assessments of brothers and sisters, individual children's needs are often diminished or not given the attention they need.

Pre-birth assessments in some cases are not completed until the child is born due to late referrals from midwives and delays in securing assessors. This lack of early planning often leads to further delay if subsequent assessments are needed and means that children's important early attachments are at risk of disruption.

Assessments considering whether brothers and sisters should be placed together or apart are generally detailed and contain good analysis of the strengths and risks of placement options. Similarly, social workers' evidence reports to court are comprehensive and set out family history, reasons for court applications and analyse permanence arrangements.

Plans are not always specific regarding what needs to happen and within what timescale. When brothers and sisters are included in the same plan, some children's needs are minimised or overlooked. Early permanence options are not always considered or analysed soon enough to show which permanence option is preferred and why. Care plans often simply list the options available and the lack of clear direction creates a risk of delay.

Case records are of variable quality. Some social work visits demonstrate purposeful, direct work with children where tools and activities are used to gain children's views about their current circumstances, life at home and their wishes for the future. The voice of the child is clear in most records, but it is not always evident what weight this is given. Some children are not seen alone, and the focus of social work visits is not always directly relevant to the plan. This means that plans are not progressed as swiftly as they should be.

Supervision records are mostly well recorded, setting out the child's circumstances, what is working well, or not. Supervision sessions are not always regular and most lack reflection on social work practice. Records are often unclear about what action should be taken and within what timescales. Managers do not ensure that all actions set are completed. It is noteworthy that some of the audited cases had outstanding actions still to be completed past the prescribed timescales.

The Trust has demonstrated that it has made some improvements since the last inspection. As more areas of practice are scrutinised, senior leaders and managers are putting in measures to improve the services offered. Many of the inspection findings identified at the last inspection remain and practice remains variable, but, crucially, the foundations are in place for practice to improve.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you and your staff for your positive engagement with this monitoring visit. 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