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Ms Lesley Hagger
Executive Director of Children's Services
Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council
Council House
Oldbury
B69 3DE

Dear Lesley,

Monitoring visit of Sandwell local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Sandwell children's services on 16 and 17 April 2019. The visit was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in January 2018. The inspectors were Andrew Waugh, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Peter McEntee, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Sandwell Children's Trust provides children's services on behalf of the local authority. The Trust is making some progress from a low base in improving services for children who are subject to care proceedings and who are looked after by the Trust.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in services for children who are subject to care proceedings and children in care. Inspectors considered the child's journey by looking at assessments of need, plans for permanence, the quality and timeliness of decision-making and management oversight.

We considered a range of evidence, including sampling electronic case records and supervision notes. In addition, we spoke to a range of staff, including managers and social workers.

Overview

Senior leaders in the Trust have developed a greater understanding of frontline practice because of their focus on areas of service delivery, interrogation of performance information and audits. However, more needs to be done to develop the quality and consistency of audits and to understand the impact on children's outcomes. Progress against the improvement plan has been maintained. Given the size of the task, improvements are incremental and there remains a lot still to do.

The number of children in care in Sandwell has risen by 20% since the inspection in 2017 and is at the highest level ever experienced by the local authority and the Trust. The Trust has analysed this large number and attributes it to delays in some children exiting care. The rise has also been attributed to the Trust having to quickly escalate cases which had drifted due to a legacy of poor practice. This was done shortly after the Trust's inception. The recent introduction of a court team is having a positive impact on assessment and planning for children and is slowing the rate of admissions into care. Some children are remaining in care for too long, with alternative plans to secure their future not being pursued in a timely way. Senior leaders and managers are aware of this and are working to address delays. They are in the process of identifying a number of children who can be safely discharged from care, through special guardianship for example, but many continue to experience drift and delay in securing permanence.

Sandwell Children's Trust has continued to attract and retain staff. The overall number of permanent staff has increased to 69%, which means that there are now more permanent and experienced staff to manage complex cases. In addition, the Trust has recruited additional agency staff above its established workforce, recognising the need to reduce caseloads and support the other services. Despite this increase in social worker numbers, there is a fragility in staffing as the agency rate remains at 30%. Social worker caseloads have not yet lowered to the Trust's expectations. In some cases, this impacts on the social workers' ability to build meaningful relationships with children and families. 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.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Senior managers and leaders continue to develop their understanding of practice through quality assurance processes and direct involvement in services. A quality assurance process that includes the auditing of children's casefiles is embedded across the service. However, some frontline managers are overly optimistic in some audit outcomes. Not all staff understand the elements of good practice, as evidenced by the moderation process and downgrading of some judgements. Further work is required to ensure consistency of approach in the auditing of work and moving towards a common understanding of practice quality.

Audits in general are focused on social work processes and do not gauge the impact of practice and decisions made in respect of the child. They are not effectively measuring case progress against children's timescales. As a result, audits are not always a learning document for social workers and team managers as they do not offer an accurate reflection of social work practice.

The social workers talked to all spoke positively about working for Sandwell Children's Trust. All reported that they receive good support from their managers. Caseloads for some social workers remain well above the Trust's maximum target of 18 cases. Some staff commented that this impacted on their ability to complete specific pieces of work, such as life-story work.

Supervision is held on a regular basis, with staff stating that they find it helpful and supportive. Some supervision records evidence reflection and clear direction and challenge. However, in too many instances the lack of progress is not challenged effectively, with actions to be completed carried forward from one supervision to the next without progress being made. Supervision is not consistently used as a tool for progressing plans and obtaining positive outcomes for children.

Senior managers understand the need to reduce the numbers of children in care where this is in the children's interest. Reviews have been undertaken of those children who might benefit from alternative permanent arrangements outside of the Trust's services, for example children placed with parents on care orders and those placed with carers who might consider special guardianship orders. While some progress has been made in these areas, this work has not had an impact on reducing the overall numbers of children in care.

Social work staff talk positively about the children who they work with. Almost all know children's histories, what they are good at and what they have achieved. The voices and experiences of children are beginning to be reflected in some case recording and through the completion of direct work. However, life-story book work has either not been started or not been completed for children who have been looked after for several years. This means that these children may not understand the reasons why they are in care.

The setting up of a court team has had a positive impact for those children in court proceedings. Children's records evidence a clear focus on ensuring that proceedings are supported by good assessments and care planning in a timely manner. Managers and social workers demonstrate a comprehensive overview and understanding of the work needed to ensure good outcomes for children. Assessments undertaken to support decision-making are often detailed and extensive in scope, including good-quality sibling together or apart assessments. There is a focus on permanence in this work, with detailed evidence to support realistic plans to place children with connected carers or adoption.

There is a greater strategic focus on progressing plans for children in care. However, many children continue to experience drift and delay. There remains continued drift and delay in current cases even where there has been recent management

oversight. For example, many children have not had the benefit of an updated single assessment, in some cases for several years, to inform a current plan. These children are now being identified, but there remains a considerable amount of work to do to ensure that all actions are progressed quickly.

The quality and timeliness of children's care plans are inconsistent. Those that are more effective include clear actions and timescales that focus on good outcomes for children. Those that are weaker lack a focus for progress or swift action by social workers. Not all arrangements for children to be cared for by relatives (connected carers) have been approved formally through an assessment process. The Trust can therefore not be assured that appropriate consideration has been given to both the child's needs and the ability of the proposed carers to meet those needs.

Senior managers understand the need to ensure robust management oversight of permanence plans and have therefore revised their panel arrangements. A refreshed panel is due to start at the end of April 2019.

Sandwell Children's Trust has demonstrated that it has made some improvements from a low base to the quality of social work practice since the last inspection. Further work remains to be done to ensure that practice is consistently good and that the best outcomes for all children are achieved.

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

Andy Waugh
Her Majesty's Inspector