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Dear Lesley

Monitoring visit of Sandwell Children's Services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Sandwell Children's Trust on 16 and 17 October 2019. The visit was the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in January 2018. The inspectors were Andrew Waugh, Her Majesty's Inspector and Maire Atherton, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Sandwell Children's Trust is making some progress in improving services for its children and young people. When the trust took over the delivery of children's services on behalf of the local authority in April 2018, services were at a low base. Since then, social work processes and practice guidance have been established, which has led to some areas of practice improving. However, now these foundations have been established, the pace of change should be further accelerated.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the services for children who are subject to child protection (CP) and child in need (CIN) plans. Inspectors considered the quality of assessments, planning and plans, and their effectiveness in improving outcomes for children. As part of the process, inspectors also considered the review of plans, the effectiveness of partnership working and management oversight.

We considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, supervision notes and audits completed by the trust. In addition, we spoke to a range of staff, including managers and social workers, based in safeguarding and assessment, care management and children with disabilities teams.

Overview

Senior leaders in the trust increasingly understand the quality of frontline social work practice due to their regular focus on performance information and audits. The quality and consistency of audits are improving, because there is a greater emphasis on understanding the impact of social workers' involvement in children's lives. The trust continues to make progress against its improvement plan.

The quality of social work practice in assessments and planning remains inconsistent. Some aspects of assessments are improving, for example children are being seen regularly, and their views are explored. A strength-based model is used to analyse risks to children, and this provides a clear rationale for actions. However, assessments are often too focused on incidents rather than being a holistic assessment of need. Most assessments demonstrate a lack of professional curiosity and an over-optimism that parents or carers will change their behaviour. Children's plans are not good enough. They are overly complicated and written in a way which is difficult for families to understand. Families are therefore not always clear about what needs to change.

Sandwell Children's Trust has continued to attract and retain staff. The staffing establishment has been further increased since the last monitoring visit to meet the demand in the assessment and care management teams. This has also led to an increase in the use of agency staff, which is now at 32% of the total children's services workforce. While this high number of agency staff represents some fragility in the workforce, half of all agency staff have been with the trust for over six months. Despite the increase in staffing, social worker caseloads in safeguarding and assessment teams and case management teams are too high. Social workers and team managers commented on the impact of not being able to complete specific pieces of work, as well as decisions being made which are not always fully considered or recorded. Although caseloads remain high, social workers spoke positively of working for the trust. They feel well supported by managers and leaders, and have access to a comprehensive training programme.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Senior leaders and managers are having a greater impact on practice through learning from their quality assurance processes and involvement in services. Recent audits demonstrate improvements in some areas of practice, with two-thirds of audits recently being judged as requires improvement or good. The quality assurance process that is embedded across the service has a strong emphasis on the auditing of children's casefiles. Previously, there was inconsistency between frontline managers and moderators, with over-optimism in audit outcomes and a lack of understanding of the elements of good practice. Senior managers have now undertaken work with auditors and moderators to develop consistency in the process. Additionally, funding has been secured to enable all audits to be moderated, along with a programme of targeted training to improve quality.

Monthly audits continue to focus on social work processes. However, there is now more evidence of assessing the impact of practice, with a stronger emphasis on children's experiences and outcomes. Most audits are balanced and proportionate and highlight areas of good practice as well as areas for development. However, social workers are not routinely involved in the audit process and describe the experience as 'being done to, rather than with'. This has the potential to undermine the trust's vision of audits improving practice and being positive learning experiences for social workers and team managers. Conversely, examples were seen where practice had markedly improved, following the support and coaching provided to staff by the beyond auditing team. Although most actions identified in audits are completed, this is often beyond agreed timescales. Learning from audits is not discussed or recorded in supervision records, which is a missed opportunity to develop social work practice. This is an area of practice that needs to be developed, to enhance the quality and consistency of the audit process.

Most assessments of children with CIN or CP plans are completed within timescales and demonstrate some aspects of good quality. Children are seen regularly, and a variety of methods are used to gather their wishes and feelings, including those of children who are non-verbal. Family histories and information from partners are used well to understand children's needs. Analysis is detailed and uses a social work practice framework effectively to understand risks. This was particularly evident when examining pre-birth assessments, which were of a good standard. Managers routinely sign off assessments with a rationale to support the recommendation. These assessments provide families with a clear understanding of concerns and of what needs to change in order to make things better. However, some assessments that are of a weaker quality show that children are visited less frequently, resulting in a poorer understanding of children's experiences. In these assessments, social workers do not demonstrate enough professional curiosity and are over-optimistic in their assessment of parents' abilities to change. Some assessments are delayed, leading to drift in implementing plans. Assessments are incident-focused rather than holistic, and wider concerns, such as the exploitation of children, are not always considered.

The quality of plans and planning is not consistently good. Those that are effective are clearly laid out and include achievable actions and objectives. They include specific timescales and named people who are responsible for completing identified tasks. Plans are multi-agency, with partners attending meetings to review progress. Families and professionals have a clear understanding of what is expected of them in order to improve the experiences of children.

However, in the majority of cases, written plans are overly complicated, repetitive and use professional language that families could find difficult to understand. Many actions are non-specific and do not address the potential risks to children. Plans lack timescales and do not include named people to hold accountable. There are also delays in updating plans. Senior managers are aware of the inconsistency in this area of practice and have acted through targeted support and training to improve practice. Where this has taken place, social workers are producing plans that are of a better quality.

In nearly all cases, meetings and reviews are held on time and are well attended by partners. Minutes of meetings demonstrate that partners are effectively engaged in managing the risks to children. However, some CIN meetings are not always held on time, leading to potential delay in completing actions.

Social workers know their children well and recognise the importance of developing positive relationships. They are able to describe in detail their work with children and families. Children's experiences are explicitly highlighted in case recording, and there is evidence of various tools being used for completing direct work. However, case records do not always reflect the work completed, and, some make it difficult to understand how children and families are involved in decision-making.

Social workers are positive about working for Sandwell Children's Trust. Senior managers are accessible and visible across the service. Social workers say that they receive regular supervision and good support from team managers. However, supervision records focus on task completion. They are not reflective of discussions relating to practice, and social workers are not prompted to think about how they could do things differently. Team managers do not always challenge plans where there is drift and delay. Caseloads for some social workers remain well above the trust's target of 18 cases, and this prevents them from completing specific pieces of work with children and families.

Senior managers understand the need to maintain a focus on social work practice, and they are taking action to address service deficits. For example, a weekly panel for children subject to CP or CIN plans is chaired by operational managers. The panel reviews children who have been subject to plans for over six months, with a focus on reducing potential drift and delay and on escalating or stepping down cases appropriately.

Sandwell Children's Trust is making improvements across its services. However, the pace of change to improve basic social work practice in assessments and plans needs to be accelerated. Further improvements are still required 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