

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Frances Craven
Chief Executive
Sandwell Children's
Trust
The Wellman Building
Dudley Road
Oldbury
B69 3DL

Dear Frances

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 11 and 12 February 2020. The visit was the sixth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in January 2018. The inspectors were Andrew Waugh, Her Majesty's Inspector and Pauline Higham, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Sandwell Children's Trust provides children's services on behalf of the local authority. The trust is making progress in improving the quality of practice for young people who receive services from the care leavers team. However, progress during the last six to eight months has been hampered by lack of capacity within the service. Although recent staff appointments are having a positive impact, caseloads are high, and staff do not always have the time they need to complete individual work with care leavers.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the services provided to young people who are care leavers. Inspectors considered the quality of assessments, pathway plans and their effectiveness in supporting young people into adulthood. As part of the process, inspectors also considered the suitability of young people's accommodation, their access to education training and employment, and management oversight.

We considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, supervision notes and audits completed by the trust. In addition, we met with a group of young people from the care leavers' forum, as well as a range of staff, including managers and personal advisers.

Overview

Senior leaders in the trust continue to maintain a close oversight of social work practice due to their examination of performance data and findings from audits. While audits increasingly focus on quality, and auditors' understanding of good practice has improved, not all audits are completed alongside practitioners. Therefore, some opportunities to reflect on and develop practice are missed.

Since the last inspection, there has been a number of developments, some of which are very recent, that have improved social work practice and have had a positive impact for care leavers. These include: the Beyond Auditing team working with personal advisers to improve the quality of assessments and pathway plans; the increased number of training flats and additional personal advisers to support young people to develop life skills; the electronic health passport application, which allows young people to access their health histories; support to young people at university or studying abroad and the inaugural care leavers' awards ceremony.

Findings and evaluation of progress

All personal advisers spoken to are positive about working for Sandwell Children's Trust. All staff report that supervision is now being held regularly and they receive good support from team managers. However, while supervision records are detailed, they are more prescriptive than reflective. Actions identified in supervision do not include timescales for completion, and, in most cases, it is difficult to understand how actions are tracked and monitored. In the last six to eight months, there has been a lack of capacity within the service to provide regular supervision and support to staff. A number of personal advisers were not receiving regular supervision, and due to staff absences, young people were not visited or were visited by people who they were not familiar with. During this time, some pathway plans were not updated. This shortfall in management oversight resulted in a lack of progress in some care leavers' plans. This shortfall has now been addressed by senior managers, with an interim manager in post since mid-January 2020. Personal advisers are now being supervised and young people have been allocated to new staff. However, caseloads in the care leavers' teams are too high. Personal advisers and managers commented on not always being able to meet young people as frequently as needed or having the time to complete specific pieces of work.

There is a developing relationship between care leavers and the corporate parenting board. Young people feel listened to and have influenced service delivery. Care leavers' engagement with the corporate parenting board has a positive impact. For example, care leavers are now prioritised as band one for housing. The trust has developed a strong local offer for care leavers which includes 'wrap-around' support

from partners. However, further work needs to be done to ensure that all young people have health passports and access to their personal history.

Monthly audits are not always completed with practitioners and therefore face-to-face reflective discussion about practice is missed. In audits selected by inspectors, none of the personal advisers were involved in the audit process. In some cases, although delayed, discussions had taken place after moderation, and this allowed staff to reflect on their practice. However, as stated at a previous monitoring visit, this has the potential to undermine the trust's vision of audits as a positive learning experience.

Despite audits not always involving the practitioner, the written quality of audits is improving. Most audits are balanced, proportionate and highlight areas of good practice, as well as areas for development. Auditors and moderators' judgements are mostly aligned, and there is a better understanding of what good social work practice looks like. The number of audits judged requires improvement to be good or good continues to increase.

Learning from audits is not routinely discussed or recorded in supervision, which is a missed opportunity to develop social work practice. Corrective actions from audits have an emphasis on social work process. In many cases, actions are completed but mostly not within agreed timescales.

Assessments and pathway plans are completed in a timely way for most young people. However, the quality of assessments and plans is inconsistent. Inspectors saw, and young people reported, that assessments and plans are too detailed and lack analysis. They repeatedly refer unnecessarily to young people's histories, and are repetitive, with the same phrases being used. Young people commented that they are asked 'tedious questions' that have no relevance, and they do not review the progress of previous actions. The process of completing assessments and pathway plans is not always inclusive for young people. They contribute through completing a 'My Voice' form, but there is a lack of face-to-face discussion, and therefore the work is not meaningful. Personal advisers and young people informed inspectors that young people do not read their plans and do not consider them to be a meaningful document.

Senior leaders have taken action to improve the quality of assessments and plans. Personal advisers completed work in January 2020 with the Beyond Auditing team. Although at an early stage, inspectors did see an improvement in the quality of written information in some recent plans.

The relationships between personal advisers and young people is an area of strength. Personal advisers' work demonstrates that they really care for their young people. Personal advisers develop positive and influential relationships with their care leavers and advocate strongly on their behalf. Personal advisers describe in detail the work they do with young people. Views of young people are sought and highlighted in case records. Where young people are not yet ready to engage with support and services, personal advisers remain in contact and ensure that they are

there when help is needed. Young people and those beyond the age of statutory support receive support for as long as they need it.

Personal advisers ensure that young people have access to a range of support, including leaving care grants, driving lessons, leisure passes, access to mentors and careers advice. There is also collaborative partnership working that provides young people with effective support systems. However, there is a fragility to the levels of support currently offered by personal advisers due to their high caseloads.

The majority of young people are in suitable accommodation that meets their needs. The trust has increased the number of training flats to 25, along with other supported accommodation. This provides young people with opportunities to learn and develop life skills to support their independence. For young people requiring emergency accommodation, the trust has developed supported 'crash-pads', as well as protocols with housing providers to prevent young people from being placed in bed and breakfast accommodation. Personal advisers are mindful of the timing when young people are ready to move on to more independent living. They often advocate for care leavers to remain in accommodation that is meeting their needs.

Personal advisers help young people to access the right professional support to gain opportunities in education, employment and training. Sandwell council offers a range of apprenticeships for young people to experience different working environments. Personal advisers are realistic and aspirational for care leavers. Support from personal advisers has enabled young people to realise their potential. Those care leavers studying at university, both at home and abroad, are equally valued and supported as apprentices and young parents. The trust has identified that education, employment and training is an area for further development.

Sandwell Children's Trust is making improvements for young people who are care leavers. Some areas of social work practice are well embedded, while there are areas of practice that require improvement to ensure they are consistently good.

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