

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

Dear Lesley

Focused visit to Sandwell local authority children's services

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic.

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Sandwell children's services on 3 and 4 March 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors were Peter McEntee, Pauline Higham, Tom Anthony, Steve Lowe, Jon Bowman and Victoria Horsefield.

The methodology for this visit was in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. However, the delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. This visit was carried out fully by remote means. Inspectors used video calls for discussions with local authority staff, managers, leaders and young people. The lead inspector and the director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The quality and monitoring of children in need and child protection plans to ensure timely progression of those plans.
- The quality and delivery of placement decisions for children looked after, including effective tracking and monitoring of these decisions, to ensure children's needs are met.
- Securing the best possible 'matching' caring arrangements for children coming into care as quickly as possible.
- The quality of oversight and challenge from team managers and independent reviewing officers to ensure effective practice.
- Access to mental health services for care leavers.
- The analysis of cultural background and identity to better understand the needs of children and families.

Findings

- Both Sandwell Borough Council and Sandwell Children's Trust have risen to the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic. They have been able to demonstrate continued and enhanced partnership working across the Borough. COVID-19 has exacerbated considerable issues of deprivation across Sandwell, resulting in very high rates of infection and resultant need. The trust's response to COVID-19 has focused on ensuring practice continuity at all levels while taking into account the nature of risk to both children, families and staff. The trust has managed to ensure that many of the most vulnerable children have been visited in their own homes, and, in partnership with schools, it has continued to identify and support those most in need. Staff state that the trust has considered their safety and personal circumstances carefully throughout the pandemic and they feel well supported.
- The impact of the third lockdown and rising COVID-19 rates have had a significant impact on staffing in Sandwell, with increased staff turnover and sickness. Senior leaders have responded to staff shortages and practice deficits by creating a Brief Intervention team and redeploying the peripatetic team and other staff. These efforts have made a positive difference, ensuring that no children have been without a social worker. However, trust leaders recognise that more needs to be done to ensure continued improvement in social work practice.
- The trust continues to have serious weaknesses in some areas identified in previous inspections. Decisions that help to secure the living arrangements of children on a long-term basis are not timely, and placements are not always well matched. There is a lack of effective oversight and challenge to poor practice from team managers and independent reviewing officers. Support services to meet the mental health needs of care leavers are still not routinely in place.
- An extensive performance management programme, including an effective case audit process, has continued throughout the pandemic. This provides senior

leaders with an overview of practice strengths and weaknesses. However, in some practice areas, not all managers have fully understood the full breadth of the issues, and this has impacted on the progress and pace of improvement. Many of the identified areas of weakness are longstanding and pre-date the pandemic. An understanding of practice deficits has not led to timely improvements and solutions for many children. The leadership team has plans in place to drive the required changes but has been slow to implement these successfully, and there is little evidence of impact.

- Initial contacts to the trust about children who may be in need or at risk of harm are responded to quickly. Decisions are timely and in almost all cases appropriate actions are taken to protect vulnerable children. Thresholds for statutory action are applied appropriately. However, for a small number of children, risk was not immediately recognised, although no harm came to these children.
- Where there are concerns about risk to children, decisions to hold strategy meetings and subsequent child protection enquiries are appropriate and, in most cases, timely. Decisions are well recorded with a clear rationale.
- Child protection enquiries are thorough, with a clear rationale for decisions and further actions. Neglect is well understood. However, culture and identity are poorly explored in child protection enquiries, and, as a result, family dynamics are not always understood as well as they could be.
- Initial and review child protection conferences are held within the required timescales. Managers' and reviewing officers' oversight of the quality of child protection plans and children in need plans is inconsistent. For some children, there is a clear focus on their needs, with timely interventions to progress the plan. In other cases, the quality of oversight and case direction is not effective in preventing drift or delay. As a result, some children are remaining on child protection plans or on children in need plans for too long.
- The trust has ensured that vulnerable children allocated to social workers are regularly visited through a mixture of virtual and face-to-face contact. Social workers have continued through the pandemic to undertake effective direct work to gain an understanding of children's views and experiences. Multi-agency working during the pandemic has been enhanced, with schools reporting good levels of information-sharing between social workers, schools and partners.
- Children come into care in Sandwell for appropriate reasons. However, alternative arrangements to care are not explored early enough, and the use of the trust's model of family group conferencing is low. There are effective and thorough pre-birth assessments and plans that enable swift action to be taken for children whose family history indicates a likelihood of significant harm.
- Tracking of the progress of children through legal proceedings, and those children subject to the public law outline process (PLO), is not well developed. However, the trust now has plans and personnel in place to improve this information. Currently, too little information is gathered to identify major blocks to progression in both areas effectively. Too many children are remaining in the court system for too long, with some children on interim care orders for several years. The current

average length of proceedings in Sandwell is reported to be 50 weeks, which is significantly more than the national average. Although the pandemic initially restricted court sittings, many of these delays are deep rooted. PLO letters are poor in construction and are not written in a way that helps parents understand the issues quickly or encourages them to engage.

- There are delays in making decisions about placements. Some children are not appropriately matched or placed with carers who can best meet their needs. In some cases, children have been placed in residential care through a lack of available and more appropriate foster homes. A lack of oversight and challenge from team managers and independent reviewing officers has resulted in delays for approving long-term fostering arrangements, rescinding of care orders for children placed at home and the timely identification and progress of special guardianship arrangements. Trust leaders acknowledge that too many decisions on placements have been resource led, and they have begun to address drift and delay. However, both identification and progress have been slow.
- The small number of young people in unregulated settings are children with the most complex needs that the trust looks after with links to gangs, high numbers of missing episodes and incidents of violence to others. Attempts are being made to find more suitable accommodation for these young people. In the majority of cases, their current accommodation does not match their needs, and young people have not benefited from enhanced risk assessments, which leaves them in potentially vulnerable situations.
- Many children in care benefit from social workers who know them well, and they have developed positive relationships with them. Social work staff often have a good understanding of children's needs. However, some children have experienced too many changes of social workers in a relatively short time, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic, and has impacted negatively on the progression of their plan.
- Social workers have worked hard to promote relationships with birth families. Despite difficulties in establishing arrangements to enable children to maintain contact with brothers, sisters and parents, the trust has opened family and contact centres as early as possible to ensure that, when appropriate, children can see their families.
- Children receive support from carers, social workers and the virtual school to promote their educational attainment. During the pandemic, this has included the provision of equipment, as well as engaging with children's schools to support their attendance and their remote learning when they have been unable to attend. The virtual school team has identified and responded effectively to gaps in learning for children in care, including provision of bespoke learning resources where a dip in attainment has been identified.
- There is effective work by the local authority to promote school attendance and engagement with remote learning. Schools are informing the local authority when children and families do not engage with them directly. All pupils with poor attendance last term have been referred to the authority and have received home

visits. Where children are electively home educated or missing from education, appropriate processes are in place to monitor and offer support.

- Care leavers have benefited from enhanced levels of support during the pandemic. These have included improved access to the duty system to access help, greater availability of IT equipment and better internet access. Personal assistants and social workers have considered young people's levels of isolation and, in response, have increased contact levels. Young people spoken to say that they have had frequent contact with their personal adviser during the pandemic through text, social media, phone calls and visits to check on their welfare and to provide practical support, such as food parcels.
- Many services to care leavers have been maintained through the pandemic, including the provision of housing opportunities such as the HOME project, which offers a clear route for young people into their own tenancies. Despite increased levels of support, numbers of young people not in education, employment or training in the pandemic period have risen substantially. At a time of increased vulnerability, mental health support services are not meeting the needs of this group, with no clear pathway for care leavers into mainstream services as a priority. Managers recognise this and say that senior leaders are committed to delivering improvements, but little progress has been made to date.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning your next inspection or visit. I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. It will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Peter McEntee
Her Majesty's Inspector