

14 January 2022

Mr Michael Jarrett
Operational Director, Children's Services
Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council
Freeth Street
Oldbury
B69 3DE

Dear Michael

Monitoring visit to Sandwell local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Sandwell children's services on 16 to 17 November 2021. This was the seventh monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in January 2018. Her Majesty's inspectors for this visit were John Roughton and Rebecca Qusted.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection in November 2017 and the focused assurance visit in March 2021:

- Permanence planning.
- Appropriateness of placements in meeting children's needs, including use of children's homes and unregulated placements.
- The sufficiency of placements and plans to meet identified needs.
- The response to children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless.
- The management of risk for children looked after who go missing, including the completion of timely and good-quality return home interviews.
- Management and independent reviewing officer oversight of the progress of care planning.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

There is tangible progress in improving the circumstances of children looked after in Sandwell. However, there remains a lot more to do to secure permanence for many children looked after. Since the last visit, the senior leadership team has changed, with a new chief executive of the trust starting in April 2021 and a new director of children's services starting in post in November 2021. The new chief executive has brought increased drive and focus to the improvement journey in Sandwell. She has

quickly reset priorities for the trust and there are early signs that changes are beginning to make a difference to children. There has been significant progress made in responding effectively to exploitation risks for children looked after, and when children present as homeless.

Despite this more recent progress, the experiences of children looked after are inconsistent, with too many waiting for permanence plans to be developed or implemented. The quality and delivery of placement decisions are now being tracked and monitored, with targeted work being undertaken to achieve permanence for children. There is more urgency required to secure permanence for the large number of children on care orders who are placed either with parents or in long-term foster care, particularly those children who are under five years old.

Findings and evaluation of progress

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on families and the workforce in Sandwell. Both Sandwell Borough Council and Sandwell Children's Trust (SCT) have responded well to the challenges of high infection rates, which were rising again at the time of this visit.

The trust has an increased focus on progressing permanence plans for children on care orders placed with parents and those placed with carers who might consider special guardianship orders. Improved tracking arrangements are now in place, seeking to ensure that these assessments are prioritised. The lack of court availability continues to slow this process. However, the pace of this work needs to increase for many children, especially for the large number of children under five years old on care orders who are living in foster care and who require an appropriate long-term plan to secure permanence.

The assessments completed of children looked after are of variable quality and consistency. Stronger assessments are comprehensive and show good understanding of children's specific needs and risks. These assessments result in clear plans that promote children's welfare and security.

Most social workers know their children well and are motivated to secure their best interests. They are culturally sensitive to ensure that, as far as possible, children are appropriately matched to carers who can meet their individual needs. However, many children experience frequent changes of social worker, which hinders the development of trusting relationships and the progression of the children's plans.

Too many children are not benefiting from the necessary direct and life-story work due to changes in social worker or capacity issues. This means that children do not always have a clear understanding of their journey into and through care.

Social workers work effectively with partner agencies such as the police, the child and family mental health services and schools. This ensures that children receive the right support to improve their experiences.

The work of independent reviewing officers (IROs) is a strength, with evidence that they escalate issues, produce specific and measurable planning and send out helpful letters to children following reviews.

Children are benefiting from the delivery of an improved child-exploitation strategy. This is resulting in increased awareness and a more consistent approach both within the trust and with partner agencies. Positive progress is being made to ensure that children who are missing receive timely return home interviews. These are informing the assessment of their risks, resulting in increased levels of intervention. Multi-agency child-exploitation panels are enhancing planning and are effective in mitigating the risks for these children. As a result, for most children, there is a reduction in the number of incidents of going missing from care, including for those children who live at a distance from Sandwell.

Children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless are assessed promptly. They are offered the right support to remain living at home or they are accommodated in suitable alternative placements. Children are aware of their rights and entitlements and receive the right level of help to promote their welfare. Children continue to be supported, including to seek reunification with their families where this is in their best interests.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are well supported. Social workers complete single assessments to assess their needs and abilities. Appropriate help is provided, using interpreters where required, to support children's access to education, health and legal advice.

Children's participation is a strength of the trust. Children looked after have the opportunity to join 'Voices of Sandwell' and other children looked after groups, such as one for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Inspectors met a group of children who described a mixed picture of their experiences. Some have experienced changes of social worker and delays in their plans being progressed. Other children spoke positively about social workers who know them well and ensure that their needs are met. Children value the opportunity to shape the trust's progress through their involvement in the corporate parenting board, interviewing staff and the induction and training of social workers. This offers children important life skills and they say that this makes them feel part of the 'Sandwell family'.

SCT has demonstrated that it knows itself well and is focusing on the right areas for improvement. There has been progress in the quality of social work practice since the last visit. The managerial oversight of care planning is showing some improvement. More children benefit from increased scrutiny of their plans by team managers and IROs. However, there are still too many children continuing to

experience drift and delay in achieving permanence. Senior leaders and managers understand the need to safely step down those children looked after whose permanence can be secured through special guardianship orders or rescinding care orders. Additional resource is being secured to increase the speed of progress for these children.

The chief executive's profile among staff is high. Staff recognise the commitment across the trust to practice improvements. Social workers feel more valued by senior leaders, who show interest in their well-being and provide opportunities for them to contribute to the development of the service.

SCT has recognised its sufficiency issues and has plans in place to increase the number of its own foster carers and to develop its own residential service. However, it is too soon to see any impact of these plans. More ambition and pace are required to ensure sufficiency of placements, in particular for those children who have the most complex needs.

Quality assurance has improved, but further work is required to fully embed the quality-assurance process to maximise its impact. More social workers are involved in audits and value the learning from them. However, team managers are not routinely undertaking them. This is a missed opportunity to fully analyse and reflect on practice. When audits do take place, good practice and areas for improvement are recognised. Audit consistency has improved, with moderation supporting clear actions for improvement. Managerial oversight to close the loop ensures that most children's lives are improved as a result of the audit process.

A key area of focus for leaders is to stabilise and strengthen the workforce. There is now a permanent senior leadership team in place. However, the use of agency staff continues to be high for social work roles and the turnover of staff and staff sickness have increased in the last year. This is understood and being responded to by the trust. A clear career pathway is now in place for social workers in Sandwell. There is a growing focus on developing newly qualified social workers, who are positive about the support and learning they are receiving.

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

John Roughton
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc Emma Taylor, Chief Executive, Sandwell Children's Trust