

Inspection of Sandwell local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 9 to 20 May 2022

Lead inspector: Alison Smale, Her Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

Services for vulnerable children and families in Sandwell have improved since the last inspection in November 2017, when they were judged to be inadequate. Since April 2018, children's services have been delivered by Sandwell Children's Trust on behalf of the local authority. New strategic leadership, which includes the chief executive of the Trust, has increased the pace and trajectory of improvement over the last year. Stronger strategic leadership has led to improvements in much of the service, through changes such as the move to a locality model, implementation of an early help strategy, a social work career pathway and high-quality specialist services. Many of children's needs are well met by social workers who collaborate effectively with partners in other services.

However, not all children experience effective social work practice, due to staff turnover, workload pressures, variation in management oversight and support and the effectiveness of partnership working. Some children remain in neglectful situations for too long and too many children enter care in an unplanned way and do not have their permanence arrangements confirmed. Leaders understand the quality of frontline practice well and are implementing clear system-wide plans. The COVID-19 pandemic has slowed Sandwell's improvement journey and there is still much more to do for services to be consistently good.

What needs to improve?

- The application of thresholds by partners when referring to children's social care, to ensure that children and families receive the right service.
- Consistent threshold decision-making, particularly when escalating statutory involvement at the 'front door' when the criteria are met for child protection enquiries.
- Management oversight and support, including the process of escalation and challenge by independent chairs to ensure timely progression of children's plans.
- The effective application of the Public Law Outline (PLO) and decision-making, to achieve timely permanence for children who come into care.
- Life-story work for all children in care, to support their understanding of the reasons for them being in care.
- The range of suitable placements for older children and those with complex needs.
- Timely transition planning to prepare children in care, including those with disabilities, for adulthood.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: requires improvement to be good

1. Children benefit from effective early help. This has been further strengthened through co-location with partners, including housing, adult social care and teams which include a Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) worker and a domestic abuse advocate. Early help assessments and child-focused plans are detailed and thorough when completed by strengthening families practitioners, resulting in timely preventative support. For many children and families, this focused help and support prevents the need for the involvement of statutory services.
2. Too many referrals made by partner agencies to the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) do not meet the threshold for children's services, in particular domestic abuse notifications from the police, which are not pre-screened, and referrals from health, which are of poor quality. This means social workers in the MASH spend too much time seeking clarification to understand the presenting concerns.
3. The vast majority of contacts and referrals are dealt with in a timely way through the MASH, based on effective decision-making. Contacts are screened by experienced and skilled social workers who make suitable decisions, informed by appropriate agency checks and history-taking. However, the social work analysis is overly descriptive and does not always consider the impact on the child of parental behaviours. There is limited evidence that children's views are sought.
4. Managers in the MASH provide clear guidance for screening priority, although evaluations of the needs and concerns are not sufficiently clear. Consent is

appropriately sought from families. Where necessary due to safeguarding concerns, consent is appropriately overridden by managers, but the rationale for this is not well recorded. Out of hours, children receive a responsive service which integrates well with the daytime service to support children and families.

5. Once involved with children's social care, children and families receive an inconsistent service. Too many children experience changes of social worker. This has an impact on the trust of children and families in professionals, as the lack of continuity disrupts progress of plans. Higher workloads for some social workers affect their ability to spend focused time with children. Other children and families benefit from stronger relational social work, which enables trusting relationships to develop. This engagement with families lays the foundations for effective direct work which helps social workers understand children's views and experiences.
6. The quality of assessments varies. Most assessments are thorough, leading to plans whereby children receive prompt support. Some children experience weaker assessments, which are more adult-focused, lack sufficient detail and have less emphasis on children's experiences within their family and community.
7. Many plans for disabled children are not implemented soon enough, which results in delays in their needs being met. Some children benefit from stronger assessments which are thorough and show an understanding of the child's individual needs and risks. These lead to child-focused plans and appropriate packages of care, with effective partnership working to support children and their families.
8. When a child is at risk of significant harm, strategy meetings and section 47 enquiries are well considered across most of the service. In a very small number of instances within the MASH, managers do not always ensure that consistent thresholds are applied to convene child protection strategy meetings and investigations. This means that the Trust cannot be assured that multi-agency information is robustly shared and actions coordinated.
9. When risks escalate, child protection conferences are held, with strong multi-agency attendance, information-sharing and decision-making. Most child protection and children in need plans are based on effective partnership working, with clearly identified needs, risks and expectations of parents. These children and families receive the right help from specialist and support agencies. However, a small number of children who experience neglect are on child protection plans for too long. Drift for these children is exacerbated by changes of social worker and weaker management oversight.
10. Midway review and challenge by child protection chairs are undertaken but their effectiveness is curtailed by limited escalation to senior managers. This results in a small number of children's situations not improving soon enough. Management oversight of frontline practice is inconsistent. Critical evaluation

and reflective supervision are underdeveloped in this part of the service, meaning that agreed actions are not always followed through.

11. Arrangements for the very small number of children who are privately fostered are not sufficiently robust. These children live with carers who meet their immediate needs but assessments have not fully evaluated carers' capacity to meet the children's needs in the longer term. Visits to these children by social workers have been intermittent and changes of social worker mean that relationships are not well developed. As a result of inspection findings, senior managers reviewed all children living in these arrangements and agreed actions to strengthen assessment and support.
12. Children at risk of exploitation and those who go missing, including children in care in Sandwell, receive highly effective support from the Horizon team. Horizon social workers are skilled and knowledgeable. They develop effective relationships with children, including those who have previously not engaged with professionals. Multi-agency child exploitation meetings are held regularly which dynamically assess risk and respond to changes in circumstances for the child, their family and their associates. Consequently, risk management plans are well informed and owned by all agencies involved with the child, reducing risk for most. Children's parents who spoke with inspectors praised the service and the positive impact it had for them and their children.
13. An increase in the number of children who are electively home educated and of children missing education (CME) has been matched by increased capacity to manage the additional workload effectively. New referrals are actioned in a timely manner and those children who are not suitable for home education are transferred quickly to the CME team. Where appropriate, formal action is taken to support children back into school when home education is not considered suitable.
14. Children aged 16 or 17 who present as homeless are not routinely provided with information about the benefits of being accommodated under section 20 and the support that this will afford them now and into the future. Assessments are undertaken and are effective in recognising risk and need in terms of accommodation and wraparound support, but this is not always provided when it is most needed.
15. When children are at risk of coming into care, families who wish to engage are supported effectively by specialist support services, including the family solutions team, family group conferencing and the multi-systemic therapy service (MST). MST provides a 24-hour, seven-days-a-week therapeutic service which is highly successful in preventing family breakdown in circumstances linked to trauma and high-risk behaviours, and is highly valued by families.
16. Most children enter the pre-proceedings stage of the PLO process too late. This means that a small number of children remain in neglectful situations for too long. Parents receive letters before proceedings which are clear and detail concerns and what has been done to support families in making positive changes for children. A separate pre-proceedings agreement details support to be provided but is not sufficiently clear about parental expectations. Children

remain in pre-proceedings for too long. Management oversight does not ensure that assessments are completed within agreed timescales. When progress is not made or sustained for the child, there is a lack of accountability and escalation.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: requires improvement to be good

17. Too many children come into care in an unplanned way, which reflects the shortfalls identified in the pre-proceedings process. Children experience delay in securing permanence during care proceedings while assessments are undertaken. Delays are exacerbated further by changes of social worker. The lengthy timescales for proceedings are excessive and far exceed judicial guidelines.
18. The quality and impact of social work practice for children in care are too variable. Some children in care, particularly disabled children, those placed out of area and the small number of children aged under 11 placed in residential care, experience delay in their plans progressing due to staff turnover and vacancies. However, many children benefit from social workers, particularly those in the children in care teams and the adoption social work team, who undertake skilled work with children and families. They collaborate effectively with partners to progress permanence plans.
19. Children who have come into care in recent months benefit from early consideration of their permanence arrangements, including early consideration of adoption through foster to adopt placements. Many children who have been in care for longer have experienced delays in their permanence plans being confirmed. Improved tracking and panel systems have resulted in confirmation of permanence for a significant number of children in long-term settled placements or have identified clear steps to achieve it. However, for too many children, permanence plans outlining where they will live into adulthood have not yet been confirmed.
20. While management oversight is stronger in some children in care teams, the quality of supervision and management decision-making is not consistently effective in progressing children's plans. This includes insufficient oversight and escalation by independent reviewing officers (IROs) to senior managers when issues or delays arise.
21. Many social workers know their children in care well and ensure that they see them regularly to hear their views and understand their wishes and feelings. Direct work for these children is undertaken, and is often used imaginatively with very young children to help them understand their plans. The Trust has developed a library of resources which supports social workers to creatively carry out individually tailored direct work with children. However, for those children without a consistent social worker and disabled children, direct work is not always purposeful. Frequent changes of social worker undermine children's confidence in them and hinder the progression of plans. While some children in care benefit from timely life-story work, others do not. This leaves many

children with a poor understanding about their histories and the reasons why they are in care.

22. The Voices of Sandwell group is regularly consulted on how to improve support to children in care, through regular attendance at corporate parenting boards. An active group, it enables children's involvement in a wide range of social activities. This group is involved in and proactively influences service developments, learning events and the induction of new staff. However, the number of children involved in this group is too small, meaning that it does not reflect well enough the population of children in care.
23. Leaders and the head of the virtual school have high expectations for children in care. They have worked diligently since the previous inspection to bring about improvements in the virtual school service and have had notable successes in improving the quality of how children in care are monitored and supported through education. Most children in care attend schools which are good or better and for those who do not, the reasons are clearly defined and in the best interests of the child. Children in care have a high attendance rate at school.
24. Most children in care live in stable placements which meet their needs, often with brothers and sisters if this is in their best interests. They are well supported and make progress in their education and learning. Children in care also enjoy a range of hobbies and interests. Where possible, children are placed with connected carers who are able to meet their needs, supported by the Trust and partner agencies. Family time is well considered and detailed for most children. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are promptly accommodated and their needs are well met.
25. Children are cared for by foster carers who are mostly well trained and skilled in meeting their needs. The number of foster carers completing core training is improving. However, targeted training is not always completed with foster carers before children come to live with them, especially in the case of those carers who look after babies and children who go missing. A foster carer recruitment strategy is in place but is still not meeting Sandwell's sufficiency needs. An insufficient number of suitable placements is available for children with complex needs. In particular, some older children experience too many changes of placement before they are settled.
26. Children are matched well with adopters. Adopters state that careful planning enables them to build meaningful connections with their children. This careful planning has resulted in low numbers of adoption breakdowns for children. There is ongoing work to improve the quality of child permanence reports through structured panel feedback and a programme of training. Reports are now more thorough and thoughtful but not of consistent quality. Later-life letters are sensitively written when children are adopted, so that children can understand why they could not live with their birth families. This helps children to understand their identity and their early life experiences.
27. Care leavers are not allocated a personal adviser (PA) soon enough to meet and build trusting relationships with them. Too many PAs are only allocated as the

care leaver approaches their 18th birthday, or beyond, which affects their preparation for adulthood. For many care leavers, contact with their PA is not frequent enough and support offered is often too reactive. Transitions for disabled children are not considered soon enough, due to delays in the timeliness of assessments and referrals, to inform the most suitable provision for children once they leave care.

28. Most care leavers' needs assessments are completed thoroughly but the quality of pathway plans varies. The views of care leavers and some of the positive work undertaken by PAs with care leavers are not reflected in their plans. Some pathway plans are not up to date and reviews tend to be every six months, rather than being dynamic to reflect significant changes in young people's circumstances. Senior managers have recognised this issue and a new pathway plan designed to address these issues has been very recently implemented, but the impact of this is not yet evident.
29. Care leavers who become parents are well supported. The health needs of care leavers are understood and they are supported to receive the right services. Care leavers who are not in education, training or employment are encouraged and supported to pursue appropriate opportunities. PAs involve young people with Connexions, Think Sandwell and the DWP, among others, to ensure that they are enabled to access support into education, training or employment as appropriate to their needs. The Trust's strategic plan is very focused on the responsibilities of the corporate parenting model, to ensure that those in care and care leavers receive the opportunities they are entitled to and make the progress they are capable of. The impact is starting to be seen in the incremental increase in the number of care leavers in education, training and employment.
30. Care leavers are well supported to find good-quality accommodation. The accommodation offer for care leavers is strong, with support to stay put, to move into semi-independent accommodation as appropriate, or to access supported trailer flats via the Housing Opportunities Made Easier (HOME) project, where young people take on the tenancy after 12 months if successful.
31. PAs are alert to risks and intervene to prevent care leavers developing potentially exploitative associations. As a result, care leavers feel better able to manage their relationships. When care leavers are in a custodial setting, PAs remain in contact with them and begin preparations for their release to identify where they may live or work.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: requires improvement to be good

32. Services are improving and there are no longer widespread and serious weaknesses in Sandwell. Leaders have achieved a significant change in the culture and impact of leadership across both the Trust and the council, which is improving services for vulnerable children and families. Leaders have faced considerable challenges in implementing this, as a result of the legacy of inadequate practice, high staff and manager turnover, and the pandemic. While

there is tangible progress, leaders are realistic about the scale of improvement still needed as a consequence of past systemic failures. Over the last year, a new chief executive at the Trust has brought energy and vision to develop a strategic pathway for service improvement. A whole-system change programme is now being implemented through a clear and comprehensive programme of improvement based on six clear priorities.

33. Effective governance arrangements have improved communication and relationships between the Trust and the council. Senior leaders in both the Trust and council recognise and prioritise the needs of children, which is reflected in their corporate decision-making and actions. Senior leaders are well informed and receive accurate evaluations of the service through regular reports. They attend a range of regular meetings to hold each other to account for the quality of practice. This has enabled them to be responsive to challenges in the local area, for example support for children and care leaver education, training and employment, and development of exploitation, missing and edge-of-care services which provide high-quality interventions to support and protect children.
34. Improved relationships between senior leaders and partners are starting to have a positive impact on key parts of the service, such as the launch of the early help strategy, provision of children and adolescent mental health services and co-location of partner agencies with some teams. However, strategic partnership remains underdeveloped, including resolving the challenges in relation to a shared understanding of thresholds and referrals into children's social care and sufficiency of placements for children with complex needs.
35. Overall, since the last inspection, progress has taken too long. Leaders understand Sandwell's local communities and are starting to use this knowledge effectively to meet their needs. Effective services have been developed, such as Horizon and the suite of edge-of-care services. However, the sufficiency needs analysis is underdeveloped and there are not sufficient placement services to meet needs. The service continues to be vulnerable to the risk of staff turnover and this creates fragility. At an operational level, there is much less consistency and there are areas of the service with insufficient management oversight and grip.
36. Use of performance information has improved, with leaders now able to use a range of data, including performance, quality assurance and complaints information, which informs plans to improve services for vulnerable children. This is strengthened by the value placed on the voice and experiences of children, young people and families who use services, who are now beginning to be involved in the quality assurance process. Learning from complaints, quality assurance and rapid reviews is cascaded through the service. It is positive that social workers who have their children's case files audited recognise this as a learning experience that they are actively involved in. This,

in turn, contributes to the positive shift in culture by providing opportunities to reflect on and improve practice. Learning from IRO challenge is less strong.

37. Leaders are realistic about the challenges of developing a sustainable workforce. There have been challenges to existing workforce retention, in particular the loss of agency social workers, which has resulted in a period when allocation to a social worker was delayed for some children. A comprehensive workforce plan has been implemented, which includes recent investment to create additional teams to support social work capacity in response to high staff turnover, a comprehensive staff learning and development offer, and investment in career pathways to support staff recruitment and retention.
38. Staff in Sandwell are positive about the visibility of senior leaders. Social workers feel well informed about the considerable changes and developments within the Trust. They value being consulted and many feel committed to Sandwell Children's Trust in the long term. Social workers enjoy working for the Trust and feel it is a friendly and supportive environment. Most workers feel valued and well supported. Social workers are able to access a range of training to support their professional development. Social workers value group reflective discussions and reflective supervision.

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