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29 November 2024

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Dear Sally Giles and Emma Taylor

Focused visit to Sandwell Children's Trust

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Sandwell Children's Trust on 30 and 31 October 2024. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Russel Breyer and Monique Lindsay.

Inspectors looked at the arrangements for contacts and referrals in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). Inspectors reviewed the threshold application and initial responses for children who need early help, children in need and child protection, and those allocated to Assessment and Intervention (A&I) teams for social work assessment and support, carried out on behalf of the Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council by Sandwell Children's Trust. Inspectors also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information.

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

Headline findings

'Front door' and early help arrangements for children in Sandwell have improved since the last inspection in May 2022. This is positive for children and families, who receive timely and appropriate responses to initial identified needs and concerns. Children who need help and protection are correctly identified within the MASH and are directed to an appropriate level of service. For most children, their needs are met by accurate assessment and effective interventions. Leaders have a good understanding of their services and are strongly focused on developing them to further improve outcomes for children. Partners are supported to contribute to this work, and to make referrals only when necessary, an area which has improved significantly. New workflow management systems have been developed, some of which will take time to embed, and there is early evidence of positive impact

following the phased implementation. There is some inconsistency in the regularity and quality of supervision for social workers, which impacts on progress for a small number of children.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Regularity and quality of supervision of social workers, and oversight of children's casework.

Main findings

Early help assessments commensurate with children's needs are undertaken by a range of agencies. Early help assessments are triaged effectively in the MASH and children are signposted to appropriate services.

A Strengthening Families (SF) service provides a range of support and works with children who have varying needs. Children are helped by this service and make good progress, with direct work being a particular strength. Family feedback about the SF service is positive, with one 15-year-old describing to us how he had been helped, and how his well-being and relationships have improved.

Children who need safeguarding receive timely consideration of their needs in the MASH. This work is thorough for most children, with well-researched histories and information from partners informing next steps. MASH practitioners are persistent in contacting main carers to gain consent, and appropriately record the reasons when consent is overridden. There are some gaps in obtaining consent from families, and in information-gathering for a small number of children, including speaking to children. Leaders are focused on developing these areas, through implementation of a relationship-based practice model, which is embedding well.

Strategy meetings are held promptly, when needed, and are well attended by partner agencies who share information and contribute effectively to discussions and decision-making.

Managers have regular oversight of the work in the MASH, are on hand for consultations with workers, and ensure appropriate and timely progression. Management decision-making is clear for most children, although for a small number the rationale for decisions and feedback to partners is not recorded in sufficient detail.

If children's needs change, or new information indicates that a different response is required, children move seamlessly between levels of service. All parts of the service are strongly committed to working together to ensure that children receive the right support.

Most assessments of need undertaken within the A&I service are timely and thorough. Social workers quickly develop relationships with children, which enables them to ascertain children's views. Direct work with most children in the A&I teams is of high quality and enables workers to understand the child's experience and what help they need.

Interventions in the A&I teams are mostly well planned. Workers access a range of resources, work well with partner agencies and advocate effectively for children to ensure their needs are met. Many children were seen to make good progress.

While most workers receive regular supervision, some have experienced long gaps and have not had sufficient direction to progress cases promptly, which leads to delays for a small number of children. Some newly qualified social workers have not received the level of supervision they need. Plans developed in supervision are not always SMART.

A well-resourced Emergency Duty Service (EDS) provides a responsive service to children out of hours, working effectively with partners to help keep children safe. The EDS links well to daytime teams to be prepared for any needs that may arise out of hours. The EDS also ensures that daytime follow-up is well supported, by completing tasks and by providing clear information.

Children who are privately fostered are supported as children in need. They are visited regularly, and their voice informs how they are helped. This includes maintaining relationships with other family members. These family members are engaged in supporting placements and children benefit from this.

Children aged 16 to 17 who present as homeless have their options explained to them and are supported by assessments from Housing and children's social care. Where required, wider agency support is provided.

Children who go missing are well supported by an effective Horizons team. Return home interviews and strategy meetings are timely and joint working is strong.

Leaders have a clear focus on bringing partners together around a shared vision for services to children in Sandwell. Strong collaborative working has led to more children's needs being met in communities by multi-agency networks. Leaders recognise that further progress is needed to fully embed this approach.

Leaders have developed a clear practice model to support their preferred approach. Regular forums are held at all levels and across partnerships to ensure that practice has impact for children.

Leaders have developed an effective system of quality assurance. Some audits are collaborative with practitioners and families, supporting a richer understanding of the

impact of the work for the child. There are plans to extend this for all audits. Auditors make helpful recommendations which are used to improve practice. Data is used effectively to ensure a good understanding of strengths and areas for development.

Leaders have stabilised the workforce with a significant reduction in social work vacancy rates. Use of agency staff has markedly reduced. Children benefit from more stable relationships with their workers. A significant number of newly qualified social workers have been recruited. A small number of more experienced workers have high caseloads. Leaders recognise this and are taking steps to address it.

Staff morale is good. All staff spoken to were positive about working for Sandwell Children's Trust and about the improvements they see being made, which are improving outcomes for children.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning the next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Russel Breyer
His Majesty's Inspector