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Mr Jim Leivers
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Dear Mr Leivers

Monitoring visit of Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council Children's Services Department

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Sandwell Children's Services on 18 and 19 April 2017. This was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged to be inadequate in February 2015. The visit was carried out by Jenny Turnross, Karen Wareing and John Roughton, Her Majesty's Inspectors.

Changes in senior leadership since the last monitoring visit and a renewed commitment to improving services by elected members are starting to result in progress. However, there continues to be insufficient focus on the quality and standards of practice, and the pace of change remains too slow. Therefore, the local authority is not yet making satisfactory progress to improve services for all children and young people in Sandwell.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors focused on the effectiveness of the recently implemented single point of contact (SPOC) arrangements, and the quality of work completed in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). Inspectors also prioritised progress made to improve the support provided to care leavers, as this was judged to be an area of weakness at the last monitoring visit. The visit also included an evaluation of the quality assurance work undertaken in the assessment teams. Inspectors considered the overall progress that has been made since the third monitoring visit on 6 and 7 December 2016.

The visit considered a range of evidence that included electronic case records, case file audits, observation of social workers and team managers and other information provided by staff and managers. In addition, inspectors spoke to a range of staff, including managers, social workers, and other practitioners.

Overview

Since the last monitoring visit, the authority has appointed a new and interim director of children's services. Senior leaders and elected members have reviewed their priorities and a number of positive changes have been made to support the much-needed improvements to services for children in Sandwell. The local authority has increased the social work establishment by 50 posts and, as a result, caseloads are starting to reduce to a manageable level. Social workers report being supported by their managers. Social workers and personal advisers value the new and well-implemented electronic case recording system. Agile working is now supporting them to have a more flexible approach to their work. The offer to care leavers is improving, although senior leaders recognise that services to care leavers are not yet good.

There continues to be insufficient focus on the quality of social work practice. Leaders and managers, particularly frontline managers, do not yet know how to achieve consistently good assessments and plans for children. Management oversight and quality assurance processes are not yet robust enough to ensure that children's lives improve. Audit activity and moderation work are not identifying critical risk issues; there is more to do to ensure that audit work and management oversight are effective and have the desired effect of improving social work practice and outcomes for all children.

Findings and evaluation of progress

There are timely and effective processes in place to ensure prompt and thorough screening of new contacts, including those that concern domestic abuse in the SPOC. Experienced and knowledgeable managers provide clear case direction and they make appropriate decisions. As a result, the application of locally agreed thresholds of need are appropriate in this part of the service. Cases are promptly and appropriately referred to early help services by managers in the SPOC. As a result, children are not subjected to unnecessary statutory interventions. However, an absence of a responsive performance management culture means that consistency of quality and timeliness across the SPOC are not assured, and neither are thematic issues identified, understood and responded to. This is particularly exemplified in the domestic abuse screening hub (DASH), where a predictable increase in contacts following the recent bank holiday weekend has not led to the sufficient deployment of resources to prevent delays in assessing children's needs.

There is an increasing awareness of the need to gain consent to undertake enquiries, but there is still inconsistency in its recording, and, in particular, management oversight and rationale in cases where it is deemed necessary to override consent are rarely evident.

The local authority recognises the need to improve the multi-agency referral form that currently does not support or promote good-quality referrals from partners. There is an inconsistent approach to the provision of constructive feedback to referrers. A much greater engagement with partners is required if they are to

understand fully what a good-quality referral must contain to ensure a clear understanding of children's needs.

Progress in the MASH continues to be on a positive trajectory. Strategy meetings are appropriately convened and well chaired by the experienced MASH manager. Agency attendance is consistently strong, although there is varying quality of information provided, and some agencies are unclear as to how to present their information in the context of the preferred risk assessment methodology. This is also the case in relation to MASH assessments and meetings. Social workers and team managers from the single assessment team attend strategy meetings, so are made aware of concerns at an early stage. More needs to be done to ensure that a collective view of strengths and concerns is recorded and that minutes of meetings are circulated swiftly to ensure that partners are clear about agreed actions and expected outcomes.

Arrangements between out-of-hours services and the MASH are robust and effective, ensuring a timely response to new contacts or existing cases should issues arise that require a response from the emergency duty service.

Appropriate decisions are made to take no further action at the conclusion of MASH enquiries, with a clear management rationale for the decision recorded.

Greater attention is now given to the support provided to care leavers. Action has been taken to address a number of concerns raised at the last monitoring visit. Leaders and elected members are demonstrating a commitment to care leavers through the much-needed remedial work that has been completed since the last monitoring visit.

Young people are now linked to a named personal adviser before their 16th birthdays, and this means that, when appropriate, needs assessments are completed sooner, resulting in a more timely response to young people's individual needs. All care leavers open to the children with disabilities team now have a current and relevant pathway plan, so there is an increased understanding of their needs and plans in place to address them. The local authority has formally signed up to the national care leavers' charter, and an information booklet has been developed with young people to ensure that all care leavers are informed of their rights and entitlements. The corporate parenting strategy has been revised, and care leavers are now a priority for the corporate parenting board.

The team manager of the care leavers' services is committed to providing a good service to all care leavers. The manager is responsible for the support and supervision of 11 staff, and the authority recognises that additional management capacity is required. Appropriate action has been taken to address this, and an additional full-time manager will join the service in the coming weeks. Similarly, the addition of three social workers in the care leavers' team now ensures that support is provided to young people who have enduring and complex needs. Caseloads are

reducing, resulting in personal advisers and social workers having more time available to support care leavers.

Pathway assessments are now starting to be completed sooner and they inform initial pathway plans. However, social workers and personal advisers continue to be uncertain of the practice standards for reassessment when care leavers' needs or risks change.

Pathway plans are timely and they are comprehensive. Personal advisers talk about how they work with young people to develop their plans. However, many pathway plans remain unsigned by young people, and the new electronic case recording system is not yet being used effectively to support pathway planning.

The response to the emotional health and well-being needs of some care leavers is still not good enough. Work has commenced to address the gap in provision for young people who do not meet the criteria for adult services. However, support and services are not yet in place for young people. Care leavers do not routinely receive their health histories as they leave care. The local authority recognises that this is a gap, although they have not yet taken action to resolve this.

Personal advisers keep in touch with care leavers and they know them very well. Care leavers are provided with every opportunity to succeed through the hard work and persistence of their personal advisers. Outcomes for all care leavers are not yet known as the service has not routinely collated management information that includes the complete cohort of young people. The new monthly performance report now provides leaders and managers with a comprehensive overview of services for children looked after and for care leavers. Senior managers and elected members are now able to identify strengths and areas of development, as they recognise that further work is needed to ensure that all care leavers receive a good service.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you and your staff for your continued positive engagement with the programme of monitoring visits. I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Jenny Turnross
Her Majesty's Inspector