

20 May 2025

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Dear Ms Giles and Ms Taylor

Focused visit to Sandwell children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Sandwell children's services on 15 and 16 April 2025. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Alison Smale and Nick Bennison.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need or subject to a protection plan, specifically:

- children subject to a letter before proceedings and the quality and impact of pre-proceedings interventions
- children in need at risk of family breakdown; and
- the quality of decisions about entering care.

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

Headline findings

Leaders are ambitious for vulnerable children in Sandwell, which is reflected in their refreshed child-focused strategies and improvement plans. Since the last inspection, some areas of the service that needed to improve have seen strengthened practice, such as the approach to the Public Law Outline (PLO) for those children who continue to be at risk of significant harm, the creation of an intervention hub and the implementation of the strengths, relationship and trauma-informed practice model which is well embedded across much of the service. Leaders understand through their own self-evaluation that there remains some inconsistent practice in the areas we considered in this focused visit. They understand which areas of the service have not improved sufficiently and have plans in place to further improve. The trust's quality assurance framework (QAF) is comprehensive but variability in the quality of audits completed at times limits the depth of their insight into practice quality to improve work with children.

The majority of children in need and who are on a child protection plan receive a proportionate and timely response which enables their parents and wider family to meet their needs. A significant minority of children in some teams experience support which is less effective. This means they do not receive the right support soon enough and some children's cases are closed without their needs being met. This is due to changes of social workers, higher caseloads and weaker management oversight in some teams. The consistent quality and timeliness of management oversight remains an area for improvement from the last inspection.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?

- Consistent practice to ensure timely and effective support to children and their families irrespective of locality team.
- Regularity and quality of supervision of social workers, and oversight of children's casework.
- The quality and focus on children when decisions to step down or end child in need intervention.
- The consistent quality of practice reviews to ensure they provide an accurate overview of practice and inform its improvement.

Main findings

When potential significant harm concerns are identified about children before their birth, a timely and structured approach is in place. This ensures thorough pre-birth assessments are completed to inform the child's plan at birth and ensure robust arrangements are in place for their early permanence, whether this is to support them to live with their family or come into care.

There is some inconsistency in the quality of assessments for children in need and those on a child protection plan, which means parental risks experienced by a minority of children are not fully identified or challenged by social workers. Many children benefit from social workers who are trained to complete parenting assessments which engage with children and parents and contain comprehensive information to help inform decisions. However, a minority of parental assessments lack sufficient depth. In some teams, delay in the completion of assessments impacts detrimentally on the timeliness of decision-making and limits the involvement of parents in those decisions for their children.

Many social workers build trusting relationships with parents and children with whom they work. Social workers undertake direct work, but the quality of this work varies in how well they understand the child's world. Children's views are reflected in core group and child in need minutes. Some social workers have a strong understanding of the needs and experiences of all children within the family. However, for some

larger families the needs of individual children are not fully understood, meaning they may have unidentified unmet needs.

Children benefit from the extensive use of family group conferences to enable the wider family network to find solutions and support children when there are concerns about potential family breakdown. This means that family members are proactively involved and for many children this prevents them coming into care.

The creation of an intervention hub has strengthened the provision of several specialist and skilled services which support families and children who are at risk of family breakdown. Strong packages of support positively impact on children's lives. The range of work offered and the close professional network ensure that the whole family is well supported.

Child protection conferences enable well-considered multi-agency discussions and lead to a clear evaluation of risk, resulting in detailed child protection plans to keep children safe. Multi-agency core groups are held regularly, and progress is made for children.

Most decisions to step down from child protection to child in need are appropriate. However, a minority of children are stepped down to child in need without concerns being well enough understood and addressed to ensure progress is sustained. Once children are stepped down from child protection to child in need, too often there is insufficient work with families to ensure that they continue to get the right support to meet ongoing needs or sustain progress. When parents withdraw consent to work with the family on a child in need basis, there is insufficient professional curiosity or information-sharing with partner agencies, which increases the vulnerability of children. Social workers do not consistently use the tools available to them to understand the impact and experience for children of neglectful parenting. This hampers their ability to assess and review the impact of their work with families. When used, it helps more accurately identify and address areas of parenting which are of concern.

Decisions to end children in need intervention are not robust enough to ensure that sustained progress has been made to meet each child's needs. Decisions are not based on thorough, up-to-date assessment of need or corroboration with families and partner agencies. Management oversight of these decisions does not consistently evaluate outstanding risks or challenge impartial or inaccurate information at closure, which means that some children may have outstanding needs or risks.

Children who become looked after in Sandwell do so when it is in their best interests and in a planned way. Senior managers have significantly strengthened the PLO process since the last inspection. This enables social workers to fully consider children's needs and encourages parents to work with helpful services to improve

their parenting and address needs which have been a barrier to good parenting of their children. Parents receive letters before proceedings which notify them in a personal and sensitive way that care proceedings are being considered. These letters make it clear what the concerns are and on what evidence this is based. Parenting and other specialist assessments are completed to a high standard within the PLO process to inform this important decision and make permanency plans at the earliest opportunity. Work with families undertaken through the PLO has had a significant impact, not just benefiting individual families to ensure the right decisions are made for highly vulnerable children but has also resulted in system benefits for children, such as a significant reduction in short notice or unplanned court applications; the number of hearings has halved, and the duration of care proceedings has considerably reduced.

When children need to come into care, there is careful consideration to find appropriate local placement matches. Pressures with placement sufficiency can make this difficult and leaders are doing more to strengthen their approach to commissioning and create more local placements for children through their new sufficiency strategy.

Unaccompanied children seeking asylum who are separated from their families benefit from an effective response. When older children are inaccurately identified as adults and placed in adult accommodation by the Home Office, the trust responds with an initial age assessment and accommodates them in appropriate supported accommodation. Assessment of their needs is undertaken to ensure that the right services are provided. When there are risks of exploitation, strategy meetings are held to ensure these risks are understood and responded to by key agencies.

The quality and timeliness of supervision vary. Social workers in some teams benefit from effective, critically reflective supervision but within several locality teams this remains an area for improvement and management oversight and direction are not effective.

Leaders have strengthened partnership governance arrangements. This provides a solid basis for communication and partnership with the council and wider partners to improve and develop services. Leaders model a strong, child-focused and aspirational ethos. There are many examples, such as peer review, the regional PLO group with other authorities and joint work with the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service, which reflect leaders' openness to learning to improve services for children. The approach to performance shows a strong connectedness between the trust and the council which enables challenge and scrutiny. The involvement of children in coproducing some key documents, such as the Working Together Strategy, is an emerging strength.

Social workers like working in Sandwell and find their managers and teams supportive. Social workers are positive about the learning offer and reflect positively about the quality of training, which is helping them to improve their practice. A small number of teams have experienced disruption as a result of a change of manager but talk positively about the management of this by more senior managers to ensure that they continued to receive support. Senior leaders are viewed by social workers as being visible and approachable, and able to provide helpful and supportive advice. Less-experienced social workers benefit from co-working more complex cases with senior social workers, which helps develop their skills and confidence.

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

Yours sincerely

Alison Smale
His Majesty's Inspector