

Nadhim Zahawi MP
Parliamentary Under- Secretary of State for Children and Families
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
LONDON

5 October 2018

Dear Minister

SANDWELL CHILDREN'S TRUST

I am pleased to submit my fourth report since being appointed as Chair of Sandwell Children's Trust.

Our key priorities since my last report in June have been to continue the improvement; to stabilise the workforce and to recruit the substantive leadership team. I am pleased that we have made good progress in all these areas.

Our Improvement Plan is now well embedded in the business of the Trust. We were able to report to the most recent Improvement Board that:

- 44 actions are now complete (36%)
- 30 actions are on track (24.5%)
- 35 actions are judged not on track, but with actions in place to mitigate (28.5%)
- 14 actions are overdue or not on track (11%)

I am pleased to report that we now have a full permanent senior leadership team with the recruitment of Pauline Turner, currently Director of Performance, Quality and Innovation at Doncaster Children's Trust. She will be our permanent Director of Operations. This is a particularly pleasing appointment as Pauline has good knowledge of the Trust already as part of the Doncaster Trust work as our Improvement Advisers.

We have completed a review of the leadership and management structure which will be implemented in October 2018 with the intention of increasing management capacity to drive improvement. Whilst the intention is to strengthen management grip, we will also see a slimming down of the numbers of Group Heads from seven to five.

We continue to work hard on recruitment and retention at the front line. We successfully launched our Sandwell Offer – the 12 reasons to work at Sandwell - to staff in July. The 12 reasons were well received, but we are now focused on ensuring the delivery of all elements of the offer particularly the learning and development opportunities.

We have recently started our first cohort of managers on the Firstline programme and will be introducing the Frontline programme to the Trust in the coming year with work already underway on this.

We are seeing results in our approach to the workforce. In August 2018, we had 206 social workers in post against an establishment of 220. This is a significant increase over the 156 in post in August 2016. In addition, we have made real progress in ensuring the stability of the workforce with the proportion of temporary staff dropping from 35.7% in August 2017 to 26.7% in August 2018.

It is also worth noting that whilst we have seen social workers leaving the Trust, in many cases our view was that they were underperforming and were not willing to be subject to the far more rigorous performance regime now in place.

Our focus on improvement of practice remains central to our work. The new Quality Assurance Framework is now well embedded and we are achieving good results with our Beyond Auditing work which enables the results of audits to be translated directly into work with and alongside frontline workers to focus on the best standards of practice. We have clear minimum practice standards and the performance governance system is becoming well embedded. Staff are now responding to the weekly performance meetings and the higher expectations being placed on them. We have also recently developed Comprehensive Performance Dashboards which enable more 'real time' analysis of performance.

Most importantly, this work is impacting on quality, practice and demand. There has been a reduction of 230 in child protection numbers since April 2018; there is an improvement in the timeliness of Initial Child Protection Conferences from 68% in April to 79% in August; Child Protection Plans updated at six monthly intervals has improved from 91.2% in March to 96.9% in August 2018.

The combined impact of more permanent social workers and work on dealing with cases means that caseloads have reduced from an average of 21 to 19.4% across the service. This is still higher than our target caseload, but represents good progress.

There is also a greater grip on the demand for the service through the weekly Directors' Resource and Decision making panel which considers all legal proceedings and admissions to care ensuring that the quality of decision making is tested fully and resources are aligned to decision making.

We are pleased that this progress was recognised during our most recent OFSTED monitoring visit. OFSTED recognised the understanding and grip of the senior leadership on the scale of the improvement task. They commended the development of standards and tools to support better frontline practice, but they noted that there is still much to do to ensure that this practice becomes embedded. We are clear that this is the case and are particularly focussed on increasing the pace, quality and timeliness of work on cases. Whilst OFSTED recognises the change that the new leadership has brought, we know that the key

task now is to ensure that this impacts on front line practice consistently. This remains the key focus of the Board and the senior leadership team.

OFSTED noted the work on audit and commended the swift follow up when issues were identified. They noted the work on recruitment and retention, the progress on getting permanent staff and recognised that staff morale is good and that staff have a good understanding of our priorities as a Trust and what we are trying to achieve.

In response to OFSTED's concern about how cases of chronic neglect are dealt with, the Improvement Board which includes all partners has decided to focus on ensuring better identification and action in cases of neglect.

We have also been subject to an Inspection of our Youth Offending Service. I am pleased that the overall rating is Good, although we are also clear that more work needs to be done on ensuring effective leadership and governance of the service.

We continue to benefit from Paul Moffatt, CEO of Doncaster Children's Trust chairing our Improvement Board. He has placed a particular emphasis on the role of partners within the Board and we have seen improved engagement in recent meetings. In addition, we are working very well with Lesley Hagger, Sandwell's new DCS who has already helped to revitalise partnership arrangements as recognised in the OFSTED monitoring letter.

In line with the Financial Mechanism included within the contract, the Board has reviewed the current year's financial performance and will be reporting to Sandwell Council a forecast overspend of £3.6m. The key drivers of this overspend are the increased numbers of Looked After Children and the cost of external placements. This additional demand was recognised at the point at which the Trust became live in April 2018 and we are now beginning discussions with the Council about how this overspend will be dealt with.

We are particularly keen to ensure that we address the root causes of the overspend and find innovative ways of delivering value for money. We already have a much tighter grip on the children coming into care through the Directors' Resource and Decision panel. Furthermore, we have prepared an 'invest to save' case to be presented to the Council. This will focus on

- Temporary managerial capacity to enable us to review and, where appropriate, move children on to return home or to permanency and to close cases.
- Developing alternatives to expensive external placements e.g. intensive foster care
- Support for the restructuring of the Group Heads reducing numbers from 7 to 5 with attendant cost savings.

We are also hopeful of sourcing additional support for our Beyond Auditing work which is at the heart of driving improved social work practice through the Trust.

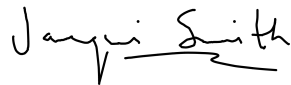
On a positive note, I am very pleased with the focus that the Board has placed on putting children and young people's voices at the heart of our work. With the Council, we are reviewing the role of the Corporate Parenting Board and how we can provide suitable support; we are developing a group of young people who will act as Young People's Advisers

to the Trust including contributing to induction and to interviews; we will develop a Shadow Board so that we can enable meaningful input into the decision making of the Board by young people; we have begun a programme of work with the young people to develop their views of the ideal social worker and foster carers which we will incorporate into training and recruitment as well.

Our relationship with Sandwell Council remains positive and constructive. In particular, the appointment of the new DCS, Lesley Hagger provides a key partner for our work together.

I would like to express my appreciation for the support of your staff at the DfE and, in particular, for Gail Emmerson our new Lead. We would love to welcome you to the Trust and look forward to being able to talk to you in more detail about the progress we're making.

Best wishes

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jacqui Smith". The signature is written in a cursive style with a prominent underline for the name "Smith".

Rt Hon Jacqui Smith
Chair, Sandwell Children's Trust